

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COMMITTEE 2013-2014

Research Mentoring: PRELIMINARY REPORT

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The University Research Committee met during the fall and spring of the 2013-2014 academic year to consider the topic of "Research Mentoring". Two questionnaires were developed based on discussions of the committee: a mentee questionnaire was sent to junior tenure-track faculty and a mentor questionnaire was sent to senior tenured faculty (associate and full professors) throughout the university. We received 230/1161 responses from the Mentors (19.8% response rate) and 112/394 responses from the Mentees (28.4% response rate).

The questionnaire and the discussion focused upon research mentoring, including its effect on the tenure and promotion process. The committee felt that mentoring is a very complex topic and it is difficult at this stage to make strong recommendations. Several themes and potential solutions did emerge from the survey results and discussion, and we summarize these below. This document should be considered a preliminary evaluation of mentoring. Further discussion and further survey-based evaluation will be needed in order to make definitive recommendations.

A. Survey Report

Because of the wide range of different schools and departments and differences in mentoring across the campus, statistical analysis of the survey results is not meaningful, and we cannot derive quantitative conclusions. Many of the respondents included free-text comments that reflected their personal experience or their knowledge of their own department. Based on the numerical results, free-text responses, and the committee's subsequent discussion, we identified the following issues from the survey, recognizing that this is a small sample of the total faculty population at USC and represents the opinions of a self-selected group of respondents rather than the actual policies of departments:

- a. Successful mentorship can have a profound positive impact on junior faculty careers and promotion. Many respondents strongly encouraged efforts to improve the mentorship process at USC.
- b. Research mentorship programs vary by department, with some having senior mentors assigned to all incoming junior faculty, while others have less formal programs or make mentors available to junior faculty who so request. Some junior faculty members stated that they did not know whether formal mentorship programs existed in their departments.

- c. Although mentors are often permitted to participate on faculty evaluation and promotion committees, most mentees and mentors did not identify a conflict of interest. However, there were a few cases in which mentees did not feel that they could openly discuss sensitive political or academic issues with mentors.
- d. The quality of mentorship varies widely and is dependent on the mentor, mentee, department expectations, and the nature of the particular field.
- e. Many mentees stated that they had no role in assignment of their mentor and for political or policy reasons did not feel comfortable to request a different mentor. In contrast, most mentors felt that they would be able to request a different mentee if they desired.
- f. The frequency of mentor-mentee meetings varied widely, but the most common preference among mentors and mentees was for monthly meetings.
- g. Most departments did not have a formal system for identifying a mentor or co-mentor from outside the home department, although several respondents felt comfortable seeking out mentors or specific advice on an informal basis.
- h. Mentors varied widely in their view of the mentorship process, with some expressing a strong belief in the process and emphasizing the importance of mentorship in junior faculty development, while others expressed a belief that the formal mentorship process was ineffective and time-consuming, and faculty should seek out mentors for themselves as needed.
- i. Many mentors and mentees said they were not aware of specific goals, standards, or recommendations for the mentoring process within their departments. More than half of mentors and mentees would be willing to participate in a workshop on mentoring.
- j. Research mentoring was generally focused on advice about the promotion and tenure process. Mentoring rarely addresses ongoing career success in the global academic community.
- k. In some cases, mentees complained that mentoring consisted primarily of criticism and statements designed to create uncertainty and fear of the promotion process.
- l. Several women were particularly critical of the lack of mentorship around gender issues for faculty.
- m. Department chairs often take on the role of informal mentors, particularly in smaller departments.
- n. Faculty who enter at the associate or full professor level are not provided with mentors. Some felt that mentorship would have been useful for the associate to full professor transition, while others felt that mentorship beyond the junior faculty level would be demeaning.
- o. There does not appear to be a formal system for evaluation of mentors and feedback to mentors or department chairs about the quality and success of mentorship.
- p. Mentors are not always given credit for time spent mentoring, and this may decrease willingness to take on a mentoring role.

The committee performed a non-exhaustive search of the USC websites, and found that most USC schools that were checked do in fact have a formal mentorship policy, and in some cases individual departments have mentorship policies. It was not always easy to find the mentorship policy documents. It was noted that CHLA has a particularly detailed and helpful document on the mentorship process.

The committee noted that the department chair/institute director/division chief plays a key role in mentoring the independent faculty member. This individual provides a role model in the specific discipline, and can mediate faculty relationships within the department, as well as make introductions and provide career support externally. Department chairs may receive informal but important training at their national research discipline groups, and administrative organizations such as AAMC also provide leadership and mentoring training for department chairs and associate deans. We are not aware that USC provides such training, but this could be highly beneficial.

As a result of the survey results and discussion, the committee identified several possible preliminary strategies to improve mentorship. Mentorship is a very complex issue and will need additional study and discussion. It may be possible to make consistent policy recommendations at a campus-wide level, but any such policy would need to take into account the differences between schools and departments, and the particular needs of faculty in each department. We divide the possible strategies into those that are intended to improve the existing system, and those that are intended to expand the existing system for broader impact.

B. Improving the existing mentorship system

1. It would be helpful to determine the fraction of schools and departments that have a formal and well-publicized mentorship strategy with clearly stated expectations and goals.
2. It may be helpful to recommend that each mentor and mentee develop a set of goals and timelines to frame the content of their interaction and provide a measure for success.
3. Association of mentors and mentees should be flexible. Departments should consider implementing policies to allow mentees to choose or switch mentors without political repercussions. For example, mentees could be given the opportunity to meet with several possible mentors and mutually agree to the relationship.
4. The university should address possible conflicts of interest, including the extent to which mentors can be permitted to participate in the evaluation process of mentees, such as participation in annual faculty reviews as well as the promotion and tenure decision process.
5. When appropriate for interdisciplinary faculty, departments should consider identifying a co-mentor or advisor from a different department.
6. The availability of mentorship training should be made widely known. The appropriate content of mentorship training needs to be determined.
7. Each school should consider implementing a process for mentee evaluation of mentors. This could take the form of a formal review process, or as informal feedback to the department chair. The results of evaluations could be used by department chairs to improve the mentorship process and mentorship education. Department chairs should be able to create formal assessments of the success of the mentorship program in their department. The goal is transparency of the process and policy, while maintaining privacy for mentors and mentees.
8. Mentors can be given credit for mentorship through annual merit reviews or reduced administrative workload, particularly if mentoring is a significantly large portion of their faculty assignment.

9. Monthly meetings are a reasonable expectation, but this may depend on the content of the meetings.
10. The department chair has a special and important role in mentoring faculty. The university should consider providing focused mentorship training for department chairs on how they may best support and encourage their faculty.

C. Expanding the existing mentorship system

11. All new faculty, even those entering at the associate or full professor level, may be provided with access to experienced USC mentors. The faculty "introduction to USC" day could be reinstated.
12. Although this committee has primarily addressed research mentorship, we note that in general, mentorship could include discussion of all aspects of academic success, including publication, teaching, seeking funding, general career issues, guidance on research and scholarship, introducing people around at national conferences, helping to establish relationships, helping faculty members obtain invitations to speak, and helping them make collegial external connections for research collaborations. The goal should be thoughtful guidance for long-term career success and impact.
13. More global concepts of mentorship can be addressed in future discussions. For example, mentoring might include situations such as when a department is changing focus and all its faculty need to learn how to respond to new expectations.
14. When appropriate, industry or other outside mentors could be helpful for faculty interested in technology transfer and industry relations.
15. A carefully designed and well-publicized mentorship policy could be a helpful tool in attracting the best new junior and senior faculty to USC.

The committee felt that further discussion and evaluation of mentoring will be needed. This could be a topic for the University Research Committee during the 2014-2015 year.