Mentoring Early Career Faculty in Geography: Issues and Strategies*

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Early career geography faculty in colleges and universities in the United States are positioned at the leading edge of a challenging period of change in higher education. Demands brought on by new technologies, new administrative and research pressures, and an increasingly competitive campus climate, may make it difficult to balance teaching, research, and service while also trying to maintain a personal life. This article argues that many geographers could benefit from the support of mentoring. Using ideas generated by participants in the Association of American Geographers’ recent project, the Geography Faculty Development Alliance, I provide both pragmatic and personal suggestions for establishing these all-important mentoring relationships to help cope with the pressures facing early career faculty. **Key Words:** higher education, mentoring, tenure and promotion.

**Introduction**

Early career geographers teaching at the college and university level are positioned at the leading edge of a remarkable and often challenging transformation in higher education. Changes brought on by new technologies, administrative and research demands, and an increasingly competitive campus climate may make it difficult to balance teaching, research, and service while also trying to maintain a personal life. In this article, I present information defending the central importance of the role of mentors for new faculty in today's college- or university-level geography departments. I argue that appropriate mentoring is a vitally important aspect of surviving the early years of an academic geography career. I then suggest some of the most effective mentoring strategies for early career geography faculty, provide information on efforts to support mentoring sponsored by the Association of American Geographers’ recent project, the Geography Faculty Development Alliance, and offer suggestions for supporting national and international mentoring networks in the discipline now and in the future.

Many of the ideas presented here were discussed in mentoring sessions organized by the Faculty Development Alliance at annual Association of American Geographers and National Council for Geographic Education conferences each year between 2001 and 2004. Panelists from a variety of institutions in the U.S. and Canada were asked to discuss some of the key issues they faced both as faculty mentors to early career faculty and as new faculty themselves. Comments and perceptions about the role of effective mentoring ranged from hopeful to borderline hysterical. Emotions often ran high as panelists and audience members shared stories of personal successes, challenges, and disappointments. A list of strategies helpful in smoothing the way for new professional geographers grew out of comments made during these sessions. This article captures some of the key moments of these two panel discussions to help provide information and ideas for continuing to build the national effort now underway to support early-career geography faculty.

**What Is a Mentor?**

The concept of mentoring dates back at least to Greek mythology when Odysseus left his son in the care of his friend, Mentor, who served as

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guardian, teacher, and father figure. Today, a mentor helps a protégée develop confidence, skills, and specific strategies for career enhancement. The mentoring concept, while not new, has received increased attention in education at all levels in recent years. In higher education, in particular, where professors have long been left alone to make or break their own future as independent academics, mentoring initiatives slowly have begun to find a focus.

Indeed, graduate school experiences may deceive new hires into confused or even false expectations of their impending faculty roles. Although most Ph.D. work is accomplished at research institutions, for example, the bulk of new faculty hires are made at colleges and universities where teaching is deemed more important than research. The new career geographer, thus, may be surprised to leave a life with uninterrupted research time punctuated by occasional teaching to enter a new life dominated by teaching with a few scattered moments for research. Perhaps most surprising is the feeling of despair that may emerge when a new faculty member, who is an expert in one very specialized aspect of the discipline, is suddenly viewed as a rank amateur in the larger campus environment. The dichotomy between amateur and specialist may create confusion and uncertainty in even the most confident newcomer. As Moss et al. (1999) have pointed out, mentoring may be especially important for women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups to assist them in negotiating the realities of life in the academy.

Mentoring in the “New” Academy

It is both the best of times and the worst of times to enter an academic career. New faculty are entering the job market at a time when higher education (and all levels of instruction leading up to it) are subject to ongoing external scrutiny and assessment from politicians, parents, and policymakers. Finkelstein, Seal, and Schuster (1998, 3) outline two hard realities of newcomers to the academic world—one a cause and the other an effect of recent developments at the national level. According to their analysis, the cause is an increasing scarcity of resources essential to meet the needs of higher education today. This is combined with the almost universal expectation that higher education’s ability to compete for support with other sectors—from K-12 schools to corrections—is likely to weaken further. The effect has been the ongoing “dominant dual strategy adopted so widely...by higher education administrators and governing boards: to contain costs and to maintain as much organizational flexibility as possible in an era of growing uncertainties, volatile student interests, and the specter of technologies that will revolutionize higher learning” (Finkelstein, Seal, and Schuster 1998, 3) while demanding continued, significant investments of their time to remain technically literate/functional. There is no doubt that faculty will be affected by these changes in both pragmatic and personal ways for many years to come.

Along with pressures brought on by adapting to these larger structural issues, higher education in the United States is internally quite complex, confusing, and unpredictable. Unlike many other nations in the world, our system is not dominated by a federally funded university system. Instead, we work within a multitude of publicly and privately funded major universities, small colleges that house Arts and Sciences faculties, and professional schools. Increasingly, two-year community colleges constitute an important segment of higher education as well. Each type of institution of higher education places different demands upon its faculty. Expectations differ, sometimes considerably. For this reason, it is essential for newly hired academic geographers to begin to understand the details of their own particular institution as early as possible in their careers.

However, many of today’s new academics—especially those teaching in “comprehensive universities”—where teaching loads remain high and the pressure to write grants and publish cutting-edge research is ever more intense—are finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with their daily workload. More senior faculty may also be challenged to meet the demands of their department while also maintaining an active research agenda of their own. Thus, when all too many of these harried new geography faculty try to find a more senior mentor to guide their decision making and help find balance in a stressful environment, they may end up discovering only another colleague who is too busy to have even a brief conversation about the challenges of being an academic.
Mentoring in the Academy

In the past decade, increased attention to mentoring new faculty, graduate students, and even undergraduates in disciplines outside geography has helped foster a national conversation about the challenges inherent in living the academic life. According to Robert Boice in *Advice for New Faculty Members*, the attractiveness of an academic career with its open scheduling and long periods of unstructured time poses hazards and a high risk of failure, especially at the outset. Common reasons for resisting advice from older, more experienced faculty in the early years of an academic career include (see Boice 2000, 3):

1. The academic life attracts self-starting, self-reliant individuals who place high value on solving problems on their own. To seek or accept help, to take direction that might encourage conformity or submission, could signal unsuitability or weakness.

2. Many academics subscribe to a kind of Social Darwinism that supposes that most new professors without the “right stuff” will be weeded out of the profession. Perhaps because many experienced and survived the same unspoken arrangement in graduate school, they accept its continuation into the professorate.

3. Older faculty’s most common style of mentoring is to share war stories that are often anecdotal and unproven—no matter how well intentioned. In the midst of this often conflicting and confusing advice, a newcomer may be tempted to ignore all of it.

Over the course of the past decade, professional geography organizations have begun to lay the foundation for providing similar support for graduate students in the field as well as early career geographers through the Association of American’s Geographer’s NSF-funded initiative for summer workshops for underrepresented students. At the same time, the National Council for Geographic Education’s Finding a Way: Encouraging Diverse Female Students in Geography (see Le Vasseur 1994; Sanders 2000) provided tools and techniques for encouraging young female students to study and appreciate geography. In 1997, women mentors working with the American Geographical Society and the National Council for Geographic Education’s Women in Geographic Education committee collaborated on the creation of a national mentoring network linking longtime members of their organizations with new student members. This attention to geographers ranging from middle school students (via the Finding a Way project) to graduate students (through the AAG summer diversity workshops) to in-service teachers (through the AGS/NCGE national mentoring initiative) laid a solid foundation for recent efforts. At the 1998 Boston AAG meetings, for example, a group of feminist geographers organized a special session on mentoring strategies (see Moss et al. 1999). As mentioned previously, most recently, the NSF-supported Geography Faculty Development Alliance project directed by Kenneth Foote has sponsored regular mentoring panels and workshops for both early career geographers and more experienced faculty. Detailed information about the ongoing activities of the Alliance can be found at http://www.colorado.edu/geography/gfda.html.

The overall goal of the Alliance project is to create and support a broad-based network that will foster the learning and teaching of geography in higher education. With the support of both the AAG and NCGE, this project is sponsoring a series of workshops and seminars to provide early career faculty and advanced doctoral students in geography with the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to excel throughout their careers in the lecture hall, seminar room, and teaching laboratory. The project has also hosted mentoring panels, sessions on “Time Management for Early Career Faculty,” and “Workshops on Teaching Portfolios” at NCGE and AAG meetings to help provide support for early career geography faculty and advanced graduate students.

Central to accomplishing the goals of the Geography Faculty Development Alliance project is encouraging mentoring by senior geography faculty through the establishment of a national geography-mentoring network. This large-scale mentoring effort is operating at a variety of scales, ranging from two faculty having coffee chats to more formal activities sponsored by national and international professional organizations.

The response to summer workshops and panel discussions sponsored by this most recent project has been gratifying. Each of the two
one-week summer workshops held in Boulder during the summers from 2002 to 2004 were attended by a sell-out crowd of twenty-five participants. In addition to these first fifty participants, a waiting list of more than one hundred additional early career faculty and graduate students signed up to attend this first round of summer workshops as well. They will form the foundation for two workshops to be held each year in 2005 and 2006.

Follow-up to these summer workshops for geographers includes panels, paper sessions, and seminars to be held at the annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers and the National Council for Geographic Education to broaden the impact of the project. An ongoing longitudinal evaluation and research component will also consider the value of the training to early career faculty during their tenure and review process. A final planned component of this project involves publishing the workshop materials as a stand-alone course for use in graduate-level geography programs to help support graduate students prior to their entrance into a professional career in the field.

Suggestions for Senior Faculty
Participants in panels and workshops on mentoring to date agree that becoming an effective mentor in our discipline can take many forms. A list of suggestions for helping more experienced geography faculty become mentors is presented in Tables 1 and 2 as a summary of ideas presented during these discussions.

Table 1  Mentoring Suggestions for Senior Faculty

| 1. Offer assistance recruiting, interviewing, and working with graduate students and faculty interested in pursuing careers in geography at the college or university level. |
| 2. Find ways to counsel first-job graduates on the most effective ways to prepare new courses, publish the results of dissertation research, and perhaps launch a new research project. |
| 3. Pursue culturally diverse, cross-generational, and collaborative mentoring opportunities for advanced graduate students and new faculty. |
| 4. Provide useful and meaningful ideas for enhancing professional development opportunities as well as the quality of life for new faculty members. |
| 5. Stay informed about changes in mentoring philosophies, techniques, and strategies as the academic climate changes through time. |
| 6. Promote mentoring opportunities and help foster an organizational culture that promotes good mentoring as an essential and integral part of academic life. |

Informal and Formal Mentoring: Suggestions for Early Career Faculty
Locating and continuing a positive relationship with an appropriate mentor or mentors may be challenging. Senior faculty are often too busy managing their own responsibilities to be aware of the needs of newer colleagues. For some new geographers, it may be easier and more comfortable to seek out a mentor outside their departments, while others prefer the ease of daily contact with a close colleague or friend. Begin by talking informally with other geographers by posing a question now and then. If they seem open to providing support and ideas, sustain contact with them. This prolonged communication may eventually build into a mentoring relationship. If it does not, mentoring experts suggest that newcomers move into conversations with others who may ultimately provide more support. If efforts to find a mentor through these informal mechanisms prove fruitless, contact administrators or faculty leaders on your new campus or officers of our discipline’s professional organizations to seek a mentor through more formal channels (such as the Geography Faculty Development Alliance).

Older faculty may be unaware of your need for support or advice. Be clear and direct until you make a close connection with a helpful colleague. Select at least three different people whom you think might be able to support you in

Table 2  Encouraging Positive Mentoring Relationships

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<th>Helpful Mentoring Behavior in Senior Faculty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Encourages discussion about teaching, research, and service</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helps demystify the tenure and promotion process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Routinely volunteers to visit colleagues’ classes to offer advice or write a letter of support for their tenure files</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits new faculty in their offices for friendly talks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shares grant opportunities and calls for papers with junior faculty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offers professional advice in an approachable manner</td>
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<th>Disabling Mentoring Behavior</th>
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<tr>
<td>Expects early-career faculty to make the initial contact and ask for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumes all is well unless there is a complaint</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requires new faculty to do things the chair’s way or the senior professors’ way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never chats with new faculty on their own turf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refuses to visit the classrooms of other faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tells war stories rather than offering constructive advice</td>
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Source: Revised and adapted from Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders 2000, 135.
a mentoring relationship. Then ask yourself each of the following questions about each potential mentoring candidate:

1. Does the colleague have the time or interest in developing a mentoring relationship?
2. Is his or her demeanor (personality type, body language, etc.) appealing and comfortable?
3. Have other colleagues or friends had a positive experience working with this potential mentor in the past and have they achieved their career goals under his/her tutelage?
4. Does the potential mentor anticipate being in the same department or program for a long period of time?
5. Does the faculty member have a positive attitude about the discipline and his/her department and university?
6. Does the person exhibit the ability to communicate ideas clearly, openly, and effectively?
7. Has the potential mentor published a respected set of papers, books, and book chapters, and is his/her teaching and service record respected in the department and university?
8. Does the person have a history of providing support for other protégés who may have had a mentoring relationship with him or her?
9. Does the potential mentor appear interested in making time to establish a close mentoring relationship now and in the future?

The Challenges of Effective Mentoring

One of the most essential parts of a formal or informal mentoring program is the training and preparation of new mentors. Mentoring panelists at annual meetings suggested that geographer-mentors may wish to work on their communication skills in listening and drawing out, motivating and energizing, persuading, asserting, and supporting less experienced geographers. In related mentoring studies, these techniques were found to be essential in influencing and supporting new faculty in a way that would support their growth and learning. Developing mentoring skills can be challenging. A common list of problems facing mentors include:

- Lack of preparation
- Time constraints
- Lack of clarity in confidentiality agreements
- Lack of clarity of purpose
- Inappropriate selection of mentee
- Lack of understanding in the department and/or university of the important role of training and maintaining a mentoring system

Prior studies have all observed that mentoring programs cannot be imposed but, instead, must be created, nurtured, and sustained by those involved.

Creating a Culture of Mentoring?

Mentoring is a mindset. There are both short-term and long-term mentoring relationships, and each relationship and mentoring experience is unique. Mentoring often happens as a result of a close affinity between two individuals. As such, it cannot be forced. Mentoring is a way of working with other geographers from the perspective of “Let’s work around a particular problem or issue to challenge and help get you to where you want to be as a professional geographer.” This article, along with the larger national initiative now underway to support early career geographers, is a call to action, particularly to senior faculty to remember that it may be difficult for many new academics to find balance in their professional and personal lives.

In my own search for balance in career and family, I moved from my first professional position as a geographer as a community college instructor and department chair, to earning tenure and promotion in a comprehensive university, to seizing the opportunity to help develop a new graduate program at a midcontinent state university. Most recently, I am living the life of a scholar first and teacher second at a collegial research institution in the Pacific Northwest. Along the way, I learned many valuable lessons. Most of them came from mentors who nurtured and guided me to take risks and to do what I love—teach, do research, write, advise students, and participate in department and university activities and our discipline’s professional organizations.

From these experiences, I offer the following “top ten” lessons taught to me by mentors and my own experience surviving the tenure and promotion process at three different universities.

It is my intention that a few of these may support
the journeys of others through the maze of becoming an academic geographer:

1. Hit the ground running.
2. Choose the geographic location and type of institution of your first job carefully.
3. Publish, publish, publish.
4. Take good teaching seriously.
5. Be courteously proactive in overseeing your own career path.
6. Broaden your specialization. Do different things and do them well.
7. Achieve academic credibility in a noncompetitive way.
8. Take risks—but think them through carefully before taking action.
9. Network in a variety of professional organizations and with other scholars in related fields.

**Suggested Readings on Mentoring**


Sears, S., and A. C. Hennessey. 1996. Students’ perceived closeness to professors: The effects of


Literature Cited


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