

Random Thoughts . . .

TURNING NEW FACULTY MEMBERS INTO QUICK STARTERS

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If you're like most faculty members, you began your academic career knowing very little about what you'd be doing for a living. You knew about working on a research project someone else had defined and gotten funded, but not about starting and managing a research program, planning and delivering courses, and dealing with the hundreds of technical and management problems that always crop up in research and teaching. No one told you much about those things after you showed up either, so you had to figure it all out yourself by trial-and-error.

This bizarre approach to career development has unfortunate consequences. Roughly 95% of new faculty members take an average of four to five years to meet or exceed their institution's expectations for research and teaching.^[1,2] The remaining 5%, however—the ones Robert Boice^[1] calls “quick starters”—manage to do it in their first two years. Considering the enormous investment institutions make in each faculty member they hire, moving more of the new ones into the quick starter category would clearly be good for everyone—the new faculty, their institutions, and the students they will teach and mentor.

Converting new faculty members into quick starters is not impossible—it's not even difficult. You just give them early guidance on how to teach well, do good research, and balance the competing demands of teaching, research, service, and personal life, and supplement this orientation with one-on-one mentoring by skilled senior colleagues.

A program containing those elements has been in place since 2000 in the N.C. State University College of Engineering. We offer it as an example of what can be done—and in our opinion, what should be done—to help new engineering faculty make the transition to their new careers quickly and successfully. In this column, we briefly outline the program (Brent, *et al.*^[3] provide more details) and summarize the lessons we have learned from our experience with it.

THE NCSU NEW-FACULTY SUPPORT PROGRAM

The centerpiece of the NCSU program is a four-day orientation workshop held in mid-August. It covers grantsmanship, recruiting and working with graduate students, designing courses and getting them off to a good start, effective lecturing and active learning, advising, time management, and dealing with a variety of crises faculty members commonly encounter. All presentations are highly interactive, and the presenters include some of the best teachers and researchers on the faculty as well as key administrators and support staff. The workshop was first given in 2000 to new engineering faculty, and since 2001 it has been given jointly to new faculty in the Colleges of Engineering and Physical and Mathematical Sciences.

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The orientation workshop is followed by a series of hour-long sessions during the academic year that reinforce workshop material and help maintain a sense of community among the participants. Topics addressed include troubleshooting teaching, dealing with funding agencies, and writing effective proposals for CAREER Awards. (Workshop alumni have an excellent record of landing them.) Another component of the support program is mentoring. In 2000, all departments identified specific ways the department heads and senior faculty would provide support to their new hires, and formal mentoring programs have been initiated in several departments.^[3]

The response of the new faculty has been overwhelmingly positive. The participants to date have given the orientation workshop 99 overall ratings of “excellent,” 12 “good,” and no “average,” “fair,” or “poor” ratings. Past workshop participants have given significantly higher ratings than nonparticipants to their career orientations, and preliminary assessments indicate that they have outperformed the nonparticipants in terms of both funded research activity and teaching evaluations. The program has maintained a high level of administrative support and has become a strong selling point for recruiting new faculty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have the following suggestions for schools planning their own new-faculty support programs.

- *Keep the program at the school/college level rather than making it campus-wide.*

Many universities have teaching centers that provide new faculty orientation, but since the organizers have to address faculty in all disciplines, they generally limit the program content to such things as campus resources and employee benefits. As important as those topics may be, such programs don't do much to convert new faculty into quick starters. When orientation is designed specifically for faculty in engineering and related disciplines, presenters can use research and teaching examples that are clearly relevant to the participants—and the greater the perceived relevance of presented material, the greater its likely impact on the recipients.

- *Get strong and visible support from the dean and department heads.*

If the director of a teaching center or the associate dean for academics invites new faculty members to attend a four-day workshop two weeks before the start of their first semester, few are likely to show up, while if the dean and department heads strongly encourage attendance and share positive evaluations from past workshop participants, most new faculty will attend.

- *Provide guidance on both research and teaching and discuss how to balance them.*

Most new faculty are nervous about meeting expectations for research productivity. Providing guidance on how to do it is an excellent way to persuade them that the workshop is worth their time. Presenters should also emphasize strategies for making teaching efficient as well as effective and for maintaining a balance of teaching, research, service, and personal life consistent with the institution's expectations and the faculty members' health and sanity.

- *Keep the presentations practical and interactive.*

A workshop that is mainly a parade of talking heads is generally not worth the time it takes to prepare and present it. If a designated presenter doesn't know how to design and deliver an effective interactive presentation, someone else who does should provide some coaching.

- *Treat the participants well.*

The new faculty should feel welcomed into the academic community, and treating them well is one way to make that happen. Hold the workshop in a convenient, comfortable location and don't skimp on the budget for meals and breaks. Provide useful resources in a well-organized notebook. Post lists of good local restaurants, parks and playgrounds, cultural attractions, and automobile repair shops. End the workshop with a celebratory reception and invite all the department heads and mentors to attend and interact with the participants. Make sure mentoring in teaching and research is provided by skilled and supportive colleagues who know something about how to mentor.^[4]

In summary, if the goal is to convert new faculty members into quick starters—productive in research and effective in teaching in their first two years—and the orientation that most of us got (*i.e.*, none) is all that's provided, there is a one-in-twenty chance of succeeding. The strategies we've proposed should improve the odds considerably.

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