Mentoring Women
A Workshop held May 7, 2009

A Summary of Discussions and Recommendations prepared by
Elizabeth Skarakis-Doyle, Ph.D
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The University of Western Ontario
Background

“Historically, women have been under-represented in Western’s faculty ranks, both in their overall number and in senior faculty and academic administrative positions.”

(Engaging the Future, 2006 Western’s Strategic Plan)

In this strategic plan, the University made a commitment to the recruitment and retention of women graduate students and faculty. It was also recognized in Engaging the Future that: “Particularly in the case of female faculty, it is important to support career development with active mentorship programs. This becomes particularly significant in the promotion process to Professor, where comparatively few mentors may be available…” While data in the Western Factbook provides evidence of success in addressing recruitment of women with a 33% increase of women faculty members in the past 4 years, the number of women at the associate rank remains unchanged and those at the full professor rank increased by only 2%.

Objectives

To address the issues articulated in Engaging the Future and following on the recommendation of 2004 University of Western Ontario’s Symposium on Women in Science and Engineering that progress in the area of mentoring women be monitored, The Teaching Support Centre and Western’s Caucus on Women’s Issues partnered to create a day long workshop “Mentoring Women” on May 7, 2009 for women across Western’s academic community including: faculty at all stages in their careers, postdoctoral fellows and associates, and graduate students. This effort was supported by the Office of the Vice-President Academic, Western’s Faculty Association and the School of Graduate and Post Doctoral Studies. The objectives of the workshop included:

1. Identifying salient mentoring experiences that contributed to the successes or challenges experienced in the academic journey.
2. Developing recommendations to create mentoring networks within and across disciplines at Western.

Over 70 participants gathered to hear the stories of women at varying stages in their academic career and then participated in an afternoon of working groups.
Outcomes

Participants in the afternoon World Café discussion groups first considered their experiences with successful mentoring.

- Participants cited formal workshops, conferences, meetings and services offered through a variety of units on campus such as International Students Services and TSC and through their professional organizations as sources in which they had found useful mentoring experiences.
- Informal networks and relationships were also sources of useful mentoring experiences.
  - Peers, colleagues, particularly those further along in their career, and supervisors have provided valuable mentoring experiences.
  - Experiences outside one’s department or program such as participating on University-wide committees, attending academic job interview talks and joining women’s coffee club or lunch groups within one’s department were also mentioned as sources for accessing mentoring networks.
- Those participants who have accomplished successful mentoring achieved this through:
  - Proactively engaging students and colleagues in sharing knowledge about opportunities.
  - This entailed interacting with those coming up behind and offering a ‘hand up’ and helping them to connect with others who could advise them and who would be sensitive to cultural, gender and religious differences.
  - Further, being a good mentee oneself, as well as being approachable, flexible and trustworthy, were also identified as contributing to successful mentoring.
  - Finally, recognizing that the need for mentoring does not end with tenure and that different types of individuals and mentoring relationships were needed for this new stage was a necessary component of successful mentoring.

The next phase of discussions considered the areas in which more mentoring would be useful and the challenges in access to that kind of mentoring or in the provision of them.

- Participants regardless of their stage in academe noted that more mentoring specifically targeted at career transition points such as from grad student/post doc to assistant professor, or from associate to full professor would be very useful. But mentoring directed at professional advancement at any point in one’s career would be useful.
More formally organized events for establishing mentoring networks were identified as desirable.

More mentoring regarding the ‘unwritten’ or implicit cultural norms of one’s department and relationship expectations between student and supervisor particularly for non-native Canadians is needed.

Guidance in coping with the ‘trailing spouse syndrome’ within and across departments would be useful.

**Perceived challenges** in obtaining this additional mentoring included:

- Culture of competition
- Dysfunctional units and relationships within them
- Physical distance from potential mentors when labs and departments are situated in many different locations
- Lack of training, interest in and institutional value placed on being a mentor.
- Lack of centrally located and easily accessed information about mentoring
- Lack of opportunity to meet potential mentors in informal settings so that networking can develop
- Concern for negative perceptions placed on asking for help and fear of judgment if one does
- Gender and cultural differences, as well as research perspectives (i.e., interdisciplinary vs disciplinary) aren’t always understood and finding mentoring that is sensitive to them is a challenge.

Notably, the lack of time to offer mentoring given one’s other workload responsibilities was identified as a significant obstacle to providing effective mentoring.

Based on commentary provided in response to the preceding two topics, the following **recommendations** to address women’s mentoring needs were offered:

**Increase awareness, visibility and accessibility of currently available mentoring programs and initiative.**

1. Specifically, a central website to publicize, promote and encourage mentoring activities. This could include a wiki or blog for a question/answer page or place for people to post relevant experiences or advice.
2. Repeat similar events as today’s workshop that included panels addressing common issues, guest speakers and opportunities to form mentoring networks.
3. Ensure that Faculty, Departmental and School leadership are aware of these opportunities and promote them among faculty, post-docs and graduate students.
Create new opportunities and programs to promote mentoring

4. Include an event at new faculty and graduate student orientations where individuals new to Western could meet senior faculty mentors

5. Create opportunities for fostering informal and voluntary mentoring relationships. This should not only occur within disciplines but across the University. Try a ‘speed dating’ concept to connect potential mentees and mentors, faculty-faculty, faculty-post doc, faculty-graduate student, grad student-grad student etc.

6. Create informal opportunities for international faculty members and international students to explore potential for mentoring relationships

7. Provide specific programming that focuses on career transition points, student to faculty position, assistant to associate rank and beyond, to prepare for advancing to the next step of one’s career. Give attention to post-tenure career issues, including promotion to professor and work-life balance across and within disciplines.

8. Create scholarly writing groups both for graduate students writing theses and also for faculty to receive support and feedback in the publication process. These groups may cross disciplines and can serve not only to provide specific feedback but also more generally to share strategies, challenges and supporting progress to completing projects

9. Faculty and student groups such as UWOfA and SOGS should establish mentoring structures

10. Identify an individual for each Faculty who creates and promotes mentoring opportunities who networks with those in similar positions in other Faculties.

Create a culture of mentorship

11. Lead by example: Individuals in senior leadership positions should promote and participate as mentors. Provide an opportunity for senior faculty and leaders to share successful mentoring practices and challenges to encourage mentoring among junior colleagues, post docs and graduate students

12. Provide workshops similar to this one for senior academic leaders using an appreciative inquiry model.

13. Reward mentoring: For example, incorporate it into workload assignments, count efforts to develop one’s mentoring skill in annual performance reviews and in promotion deliberations, create a mentoring excellence award that recognizes great mentors. That is, concretely demonstrate the value of mentoring to the institution.

14. Ensure a safe environment where self-disclosures can be made and knowledge can be shared without fear of negative consequences.

15. ‘Hire to replace not replicate’ to move beyond ‘old boys networks’ that are obstacles to a cooperative mentoring environment

16. Recognize the similarities and differences in mentoring needs of the diverse groups comprising our community