Welcome to Oxford!

New appointees experience a busy and demanding time as they arrive and settle in to their new role as an Oxford academic. Mentoring is one response that many areas within the University already use or are currently developing to assist during this orientation period.

On the basis of past experience of mentoring at Oxford, and findings from an extensive survey in 2006, three things stand out:

1. Typically, the focus changes through time. Initially, concern is with practical matters, ‘how to get things done around here’. Thereafter, the focus is on the research-teaching balance, or even research performance.

2. Of central importance is getting a mentor-mentee relationship started on the right footing. Typically, mentors will initiate the first contact within the first few weeks following the arrival of the mentee at Oxford.

3. Scoping an appropriate and mutually agreed discussion ‘agenda’ for the first meeting seems to be central for the longer term success and value of the support that can be gained from a mentoring arrangement.

Some suggestions about how to approach a first meeting follow.

In preparation for or as part of an initial meeting…

- Establish what arrangements for mentoring are already in place (e.g. in University, Division, Faculty, School, Department, College, etc).
Consider what you want out of a mentoring relationship, while thinking about the role of the mentor in the context of other sources of information and support in the Faculty, Department or College.

Think about how often, and in what contexts, you would like meetings to take place. (Some faculties/departments may specify the duration of the relationship.)

Consider what your priorities are in the first instance. Determining what is important for you, (and what can be excluded, at least for a while anyway) is probably the first objective.

Seek to identify and separate short-term urgent needs (e.g. those that tend to focus on dealing with immediate practical matters) from the longer-term important ones (e.g. dealing with teaching, research and teaching-research balance), especially those leading up to completion of probation.

At the initial meeting...

Discuss your desire for pursuing an ongoing mentoring relationship.

Clarify that your understanding of existing arrangements for mentoring (e.g. in the University, Division, Faculty, School, Department, College, etc) is correct.

Talk about your priorities, and establish with your mentor where s/he can be helpful, and where other sources of advice might be appropriate. Don’t assume that the mentor will always have the answer, but if s/he does not, then s/he will probably be able to tell you who does.

Clarify as well the approach to confidentiality that you’d like to see adopted. Generally it is the mentee who should take the initiative in outlining the preferred approach to confidentiality, even when the mentor first raises the issue.

Clarify with your mentor the overall pattern of engagement. This concerns matters such as: likely overall duration of the relationship; the nature of formality involved; the extent to which the relationship centres on scheduled meetings; how frequently such meetings are needed, and so forth.

“A mentor was appointed; however it [mentoring relationship] has no importance to me, I prefer to ask different people for different purposes.”
(mentee, 2006 survey)

“In a few cases, it may turn out that a designated mentor-mentee relationship does not work, for whatever reason. In these cases, mentees should approach a senior colleague with a view to finding out how best to request a no-fault termination of the existing arrangement, and possibly explore alternatives.

“Three meetings in the 1st term, thereafter once a term for the first 2 years.”
(mentee, 2006 survey)

“Ideally there should be opportunities for informal interaction as well as formal meetings.”
(mentor, 2006 survey)

“It really depends; in my case we work together on a regular basis on research matters anyway and meet up regularly.”
(mentee, 2006 survey)

Explore what else might be useful to consider in your context that you may not have thought of, or been aware of.

Consider and agree the next step(s) to be tackled together. Is there benefit in agreeing a specific date for the next meeting? If so, when should it be?
Subsequent to an initial meeting…

- Review how things are settling down. Are you achieving what you need from a mentoring arrangement?

- Remember that there is a range of other potential sources of assistance. Collegial networks extend both within your Department or faculty, and within your College, at the very least.

- Revisit the next step(s) agreed at your initial meeting. Anything missing, or have priorities altered in any way since then?

- Are things in hand now for subsequent meetings? Anything further to attend to at this juncture?

“there is a not unjustifiable assumption that new faculty will be able to ask for help, and my colleagues have been quite helpful though perhaps not “mentors” in the sense of someone consistently giving advice or advocacy”
(mentee, 2006 survey)

“…because the college is a community, advice and help are available all round.”
(mentor, 2006 survey)

Finally, please don’t hesitate to examine the full range of programmes offered by the Oxford Learning Institute by visiting the website: www.learning.ox.ac.uk

With best wishes for a successful transition and prosperous experience at Oxford!