

**RCR Topic:** Mentor/Trainee Relationships

**Title:** Mentoring a New Faculty Member

**Case:** Jim came to MSU directly from a PhD program. His department assured him that his lack of postdoctoral experience would not be a problem. They assigned Mary, one of the department's most successful senior faculty members to serve as Jim's research mentor. Mary (Jim's new research mentor) had a long history of substantial funding from the Department of Defense (DOD) and suggested that Jim could easily join the team. Mary used DOD grant money to support Jim's travel and research expenses for six weeks overseas. The work was not very productive. Still, Mary included Jim on a continuation proposal to DOD that was funded. While not abandoning Mary's project, Jim pursued other research projects as well, submitting several proposals to NSF. None were funded.

Mary is not only a very successful researcher, but also teaches 2 courses per year plus 1-2 graduate seminars per year. In a small department, she argues, higher teaching loads are necessary to maintain good undergraduate and graduate programs. At her suggestion, Jim took on a similar teaching load. The department chair thought the teaching load was a little high so he asked senior faculty to volunteer to take on some of Jim's undergraduate classes but none stepped forward. As a result, Jim's teaching load for the first three years was 3 courses per year. Senior faculty members in the department teach an average of 2.5 courses per year.

Based on his a good publication record, Jim's department unanimously approved his re-appointment. However, the College Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure (RPT) Committee did not approve him. The committee stated that Jim failed to demonstrate his ability to generate external grant support for his research and should re-apply next year. College guidelines for re-appointment, promotion and tenure are:

*Competitive, external research funding is available in most of the disciplines in the College of Natural Science and is usually necessary to support a research program of the quality and impact expected at Michigan State University. External research funding at a level appropriate for the candidate's discipline should be in place. In most fields the candidate should have submitted proposals for competitive, external research funding within the first two years and have continued to aggressively pursue such funding. If such funding is not in place at the time of reappointment, proposals for funding beginning the 4th year should have been submitted. In these cases the department should submit a funding update to the college in January of the candidate's 4th year. In a few fields,*

*obtaining independent external funding is not expected of assistant professors, either because funding is not available or is awarded to large research collaborations. In these cases, this must be clarified and understood by the candidate, department, and college at the time the candidate is hired and documented in the reappointment materials.*

Jim appealed the committee's decision. Jim argued that the advice he received from his mentor, Mary, was counterproductive. The six weeks spent overseas could have been better used to develop and submit another research proposal. He stated that even though he did not help write the continuation proposal, the grant should count in his favor since he invested considerable time and effort in the project. In addition, Jim's teaching load took away from time he might have spent on research. There was no mention of Jim's research productivity (positive or negative) in his annual evaluations.

The committee responded to Jim's appeal noting that the College guidelines for RPT are available online. They stated that they have no way of judging departmental teaching loads and/or mentoring.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. To what extent should a faculty member's scholarly productivity be judged on effort versus actual accomplishments?
  - a. Should the scholarly productivity of junior faculty (e.g., assistant professors) be judged differently than the productivity of senior faculty (e.g., associate and full professors)?
  - b. How should employers judge the scholarly productivity of potential employees (e.g., graduate students and post-doctoral fellows)?
  - c. What is the reality in your department or discipline?
2. How can interested persons learn about the expectations for reappointment, promotion, and tenure at a particular department/university, especially if policy statements are unclear? In this case study, what sources of information should be available to Jim?
3. Was Mary a good mentor to Jim? Given that Mary was assigned to be a research mentor, should she have offered advice about Jim's teaching load?
  - a. What type of mentoring does a junior faculty member like Jim need?
  - b. What type of mentoring is a senior faculty member prepared to offer?
  - c. Should departments assign mentors to junior faculty members, or should the junior faculty member make the choice?
4. In this case study, there were at least two possible ways in which Jim may have been misled about his progress toward reappointment: (a) Jim claimed that

Mary's advice was counterproductive; and (b) there was no mention in his annual reviews about concerns regarding his scholarly productivity. To what extent are these valid claims? Should Jim have known better?

5. How could Jim's lack of postdoctoral experience have affected his research productivity? How important is postdoctoral study in your discipline?
6. In this case study, the department chairperson noticed Jim's overload in teaching. Should the chairperson have done more to adjust Jim's assigned teaching load?
  - a. Who makes teaching, outreach/service, research, and administrative assignments in your department?
  - b. What is an appropriate balance of these activities for assistant, associate, and full professors? Who should decide?
  - c. Who is (or should be) responsible for overseeing the load assignments of faculty members? To what extent should junior faculty members be "protected" from excessive teaching, outreach/service, or administrative assignments and to what extent do junior faculty members need to look out for themselves?
  - d. Sometimes it is important to have particular interests (e.g., particular disciplinary perspectives, women, diversity) represented on committees. How can a person from one of these groups prevent being overloaded with such assignments?
  - e. To what extent should load assignments or scholarly productivity expectations be different for parents of infants and young children?

**Definitions:**

Reappointment. Assistant professors work under a sort of trial or probationary period for their first few years at a university. Usually after 2-4 years, they must apply for reappointment. A successful application for reappointment depends upon evidence of good progress toward tenure and promotion. The criteria vary from university to university, and also from department to department. Usually the criteria focus on scholarly productivity (research funding and publications), teaching (high quality in course design/materials and good teaching evaluations), and outreach/service (contributions of professional expertise to the function of the university, community, and beyond).

Promotion. Promotion refers to advancement from the rank of assistant professor to associate professor, or from associate professor to full professor. The criteria again focus on scholarly productivity, teaching, and outreach/service. In addition, evaluations

typically focus on the trajectory toward national and international prominence in one's field of study.

Tenure. In the university setting, tenure refers to job security. When a faculty member is promoted from assistant to associate professor rank, s/he has earned a significant level of job security, which often is associated with greater academic freedom to pursue research interests.

Annual review. At Michigan State University, each faculty member is entitled to an annual written review prepared by her/his department chairperson. That review typically focuses on fulfillment of the faculty member's responsibilities for the previous academic year, as well as progress toward future reappointment, promotion, and tenure evaluations.