The Department Chair's Role in Developing New Faculty into Teachers and Scholars (review)

Mary Deane Sorcinelli, University of Massachusetts - Amherst

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/marydeane_sorcinelli/27/
Book Reviews

*The Department Chair’s Role in Developing New Faculty into Teachers and Scholars*, by Estela Mara Bensimon, Kelly Ward, and Karla Sanders. Anker Publishing, 2000. 232 pp. $25.95 (paper)

MARY DEANE SORCINELLI, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

If studies and reports over the last decade are any indication, attracting, developing, and retaining early career faculty continues to capture the attention of scholars, academic administrators, and faculty development leaders in higher education. Many of these studies have suggested that intellectual, social, and resource support from senior faculty, chairs, deans and other campus administrators are critical to the success of new faculty. In particular, findings point to the essential role played by the department chair. Hence, Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders’ examination in this book of the role that chairs play in “repopulating, remaking and repositioning the American academy” is both timely and needed. As the book’s title suggests, the authors focus on the pivotal role the department chair plays in socializing new faculty members, in assisting them in reaching their greatest productivity. Indeed, Bensimon, Kelly, and Sanders take a broad view of new colleagues’ initiation into the culture of the department and institution, comprehensively exploring three distinct phases in the development of new faculty.

The first area the authors explore is the recruitment and selection process of candidates, including practical advice about the wording of position announcements, interview questions, and letters of appointment. They also include guidelines for planning effective campus visits and providing relocation support, suggesting that management of the recruitment process plays a critical, and often overlooked, role in a candidate’s integration into her department. Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders then target the development of faculty in the first year, emphasizing the role of the chair in helping newcomers become effective teachers and productive scholars. They provide persuasive evidence that a range of both formal and informal orientations are an essential ongoing process for providing information and support. Finally, in examining the development of faculty beyond the first year, the authors discuss the role of the chair as mentor. They recommend a mentoring system, clear advice on the tenure process and evaluations, and the creation of effective—and balanced—commitments to teaching, research, and service to meet the expectations of both departments and institutions.

Throughout all the chapters, Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders emphasize the importance of demystifying the process for new faculty: from helping a new colleague negotiate a benefits package to understanding the unspoken rules for being awarded tenure, senior faculty possess the information new professors may not want—or know—to request. Much of the advice in this book is
directed toward helping the new faculty member identify and effectively confront common difficulties faced in the process of socialization into a new institution: a lack of adequate teaching preparation, making wise decisions regarding committee work, neglecting research work in favor of more immediate concerns (like teaching), and confusion about the institution’s priorities.

Offering practical advice, Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders rely on a variety of sources, including interviews with new faculty, hypothetical scenarios to demonstrate the dilemmas faced by new faculty coupled with effective and appropriate responses, and examples from successful campus programs. Particularly attractive is the hands-on approach of this book. For example, in each chapter, the authors raise critical questions and then provide advice in the form of concrete materials such as samples of position announcements, candidate interview questions, letters of appointment, and annual plans that can be readily adapted to individual contexts. Each chapter concludes with a series of checklists, such as “Candidate’s Disqualification” (to help manage a high volume of applications), “Topics to Include in Year-Long Orientation Programs,” and “What the New Faculty Member Will Need to Know before Arriving on Campus.”

While the volume includes a wealth of advice, often in the form of “Do’s and Don’ts,” it avoids being prescriptive and limiting. With an underlying acknowledgment that institutions and departments vary, the authors offer a range of options to address the myriad difficulties in the complicated transition from graduate student to faculty member. In doing so, they emphasize the importance of the involvement of all faculty, not only the department chair, in this process. And they are careful to acknowledge that particular issues relating to women and racial minorities require particular attention.

The Department Chair’s Role in Developing New Faculty into Teachers and Scholars makes an important contribution to the literature on new faculty development because the extant literature has tended to focus on developing faculty after their arrival on campus. I found this book particularly informative and useful in documenting how to support newcomers during recruitment and hiring, before their arrival on campus. Chairs and others working with new faculty will appreciate the pragmatic suggestions for improving departmental practices and policies for organizing a search, negotiating the job offer, and providing information prior to arrival as well as the wealth of ideas for supporting faculty during and beyond the first year.

This book both complements and supplements several other useful works from the new faculty development literature, including Boice’s The New Faculty Member (1992), Sorcinelli and Austin’s Developing New and Junior Faculty (1992), Tierney and Bensimon’s Promotion and Tenure (1996), Menges’s Faculty in New Jobs (1999), and Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin’s Heeding New Voices (2000). Taken together, these five books provide an overview of the fundamental issues affecting newcomers to the professoriate; they also provide a wealth of principles of good practice for supporting new and early-career faculty.

References

An enduring irony of American higher education is its ineptitude with assessment. Systematic reflection is often foreign to the academic culture, even though reflection on what is “true” or “good” is what keeps the culture alive, or ought to. One would think that two-year colleges, with their unambiguous missions of teaching and service to their communities, would be more receptive to a culture of assessment, and in a sense they are. Unfortunately, assessment in these contexts tends to be bureaucratic and managerial rather than focused on the academic and professional development of the faculty.

This book promises to fill the breach by offering ways in which performance evaluation might be used effectively in two-year colleges, which, as the authors note, now serve nearly half of all postsecondary students. However, the book’s promise is not fulfilled. Administrators will not find in this volume a comprehensive resource that will help them tailor professional assessment systems to the mission and values of the two-year college, and scholars looking for an integrative review of research on performance evaluation systems that work best there will not find that either. Instead, although it contains numerous examples of policies and instruments used in community colleges, the book is largely a rehash of the more general literature on faculty evaluation and warmed-over recommendations that have been expressed more forcefully and in more helpful detail elsewhere (cf. Braskamp & Ory, 1994).

Evaluating, Improving, and Judging Faculty Performance in Two-Year Colleges sets the tone for what is to follow in its first chapter, “Assessing Your Institution’s Climate for Evaluation and Development.” One would think, judging from its title, that the chapter would review the evidence on what constitutes a healthy climate for evaluation and development in two-year colleges and then extend these findings to a set of guidelines for effective evaluation practice. Instead, what we get are some “common elements . . . that impact upon (sic) evaluation and development,” a brief description of the Total Quality movement, a two-page section entitled “The Evaluation Process,” which inexplicably focuses entirely on research on post-tenure review, and finally a section, called “Devel-