

We appreciate the assistance in the overall National Science Foundation ADVANCE project from our team member Dr. Sandra Weissinger and from graduate assistants Emily Love and Sierra Moody. Support for this work was provided by the National Science Foundation through Award 1936141. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this event are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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# Facilitating Faculty Retention and Professional Development through External Peer Mentor Networks

**Maria Bertagnolli, Chrystal Bruce, Sarah Kirk, Hala Schepmann, and Victoria Turgeon**

Academic institutions spend quite a bit of time and money recruiting faculty. However, once hired, faculty are not always provided adequate mentoring and can struggle to feel connected to their university community. Observations and feedback are often done for the purpose of assessment and evaluation rather than to support the professional development of colleagues, leaving faculty unsure about whether they are making appropriate progress toward meeting criteria for tenure and promotion. Having autonomy to develop and deliver courses, manage daily schedules, and select the focus of scholarship, service, and administrative activities is certainly a benefit that faculty enjoy but, without guidance and support, can cause a sense of isolation, undermine confidence, lead to burnout, and result in failure to meet advancement expectations. The pandemic magnified this siloing effect, profoundly impacting new faculty and those hired for the diversity they brought but not provided the resources or support necessary for their success. All these factors can prompt faculty to leave academia. How can we as administrators and department chairs provide support for faculty to not only stay but also thrive in the academy? Although there are many effective strategies, we present here a powerful faculty peer mentoring model that we have been implementing and expanding for the past twelve years that builds community, confidence, and the capacity to take on increasing levels of leadership and that ultimately supports advancement and career development.

Our experience with the peer mentoring model began in 2012 when we participated in the NSF ADVANCE ASAP project, *Advancing the Careers of Women in STEM at Predominantly Undergraduate Institutions*. Mentoring alliances were created based on career stage and discipline. Over a four-year period, our group of midcareer chemists from different institutions (our "alliance") met monthly in a remote capacity and annually in person. During our time together, we discussed our scholarly efforts, teaching

methodologies, service activities, and career plans. We reviewed one another's grant proposals, manuscripts, and tenure and promotion documents. We also shared numerous pedagogical and scholarly resources; professional development and funding opportunities; and information about campus practices, policies, and infrastructures. Our alliance provided us the support, mentorship, and networking needed to grow both professionally and personally. We addressed the challenges that were holding us back, prioritized the many competing demands on our time, and held one another accountable to pursue our goals. We also realized that our voices had the power to affect systemic change.

As the confidence and capacity of each member of our alliance increased, so too did our desire to support other faculty. As we grew in our own leadership, we expanded our community to the current team that sought and received funding from the NSF ADVANCE Partnership Program to create regional, interinstitutional peer mentoring networks that now exist in the Northwest, Midwest, and Southeast. In contrast to more traditional mentoring models, in which junior faculty are paired with more senior members in their home department, our ASCEND model (Advancing STEM Careers by Empowering Network Development) brings together faculty from similar disciplines and stages of their career who work at different institutions. Members of the peer mentoring alliances are more comfortable asking questions and speaking openly about their experiences with colleagues outside their institutions knowing that they will not be formally evaluating one another's work. The specific aims of our grant were focused on promoting the advancement of midcareer women in STEM disciplines; however, this model can be applied to faculty in any discipline and at any stage of their career.

Here are the major considerations that we have found to be important when building successful interinstitutional peer mentoring networks:

- *Geographic proximity* maximizes opportunities for participants to interact with one another (same time zone; may be able to gather in person periodically) and recognizes the value of understanding shared common regional cultures.
- *Related disciplines* allow alliance members to provide informed guidance to one another, particularly with respect to scholarship and teaching.
- *Institution type*, including teaching, scholarship, and service expectations, as well as similar financial situations, are also important factors to consider.
- *Four to five members per alliance* provides space for all voices to be heard; everyone in the alliance can fit in one car when traveling together.
- *Intersectional factors* intentionally encourage participation by faculty from minoritized backgrounds. Faculty who are underrepresented in their academic disciplines, particularly those with intersectional underrepresented identities, encounter more significant barriers to success in their academic careers and typically shoulder higher service and advising workloads. This “hidden work” is often not acknowledged or valued in comparison to excellent teaching and productive scholarship in the evaluation of tenure and promotion applications.

To facilitate the formation of peer mentoring networks, we recommend making use of existing regional consortia or organizations that would allow faculty from different institutions to engage with one another. Academic leaders can also provide structural support and serve as resources. To foster independence, we recommend identifying a convenor within each group to schedule monthly virtual meetings. For these meetings, it is helpful to provide a framework to guide the discussions while allowing groups flexibility to focus on timely topics of interest. To develop and maintain a trusting and supportive community, we incorporated community-building activities into participant meetings and collectively created a community of trust agreement. Participants were encouraged to bring their whole selves to the conversations, recognizing that our personal lives impact our professional lives.

One of the first activities we asked of our ASCEND participants was to create individual professional development plans. They were encouraged to discuss these with one another periodically; modify them based on achievements and new interests and skill sets; and hold one another accountable to support progress toward their goals. In order to be responsive to the needs of each alliance, we asked alliances to report back after their meetings so that we could address questions and provide resources to support them as they worked toward their goals, which notably evolved and changed over the years. In particular, we responded to their requests for education, training, and professional support related to their interests in developing leadership skills and for gaining a better understanding of policies and practices at their own and peer institutions.

The impact of peer mentoring networks can be profound. They provide a sense of inclusion and empowerment, which fosters resilience in the face of expected and unexpected challenges. Peer

support not only benefits the individual but also promotes the collective advancement of groups, which can positively influence departments and lead to institutional transformation. Each member of our own alliance, which now includes eight women in STEM disciplines, has experienced significant professional growth and development, has taken on increasing levels of academic leadership, and has benefited personally from our alliance. Several have been recognized at their institutions through awards for their leadership, teaching, scholarship, and service. Through surveys and interviews, participants of our ASCEND alliances have shared that their confidence has grown significantly as a result of the support they have received from their alliance and the network of alliances created through the ASCEND project. Specifically, they now feel more prepared to hold leadership positions, are more aware of opportunities for professional growth, and feel more prepared to develop their own mentoring relationships. Several have been promoted to full professor. Others have taken on the role of department chair, and many are recognizing ways in which they can apply their skills, knowledge, and interests to help support colleagues at their own institutions. Importantly, their activism has moved beyond self-advocacy to advocacy for others and promotion of cultural and institutional change.

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As we continue to focus on recruiting excellent faculty who can best support not only today's students but also those who will be seeking a college education in the coming decades, we must ensure that we have strategies in place that will promote faculty retention and provide them with opportunities for growth and development throughout their careers. This support can and should come from a variety of sources, including mentoring from colleagues at their home institution, with frequent check-ins outside of formal evaluations to review immediate and longer-range goals and the progress made toward those goals. But there are many additional benefits that come from building mentor networks with peers outside of our home institutions with whom we can share our challenges and successes, serve as sounding boards when making decisions about how best to focus our time and energy, serve as sponsors for professional development and career advancement opportunities, and broaden exposure and access to different aspects of academia. Peer mentoring networks that help faculty make meaningful connections with colleagues at other institutions within their region, who are at similar stages of their career and in similar disciplines, ultimately benefit not only the individual but also the institution. Faculty who feel supported are more likely to stay in academia, be successful in their careers, and make meaningful contributions that positively impact the academic community. ▲



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This article is based on a presentation at the 80th Annual ACAD Meeting, February 21–23, 2024, Tampa, Florida.

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## Managing Change, Part 2: Successful Planning

**Donna M. Buchanan**

The impact of change on higher education organizations and their people has been devastating (Buchanan 2023), and it's likely that one or more areas of your institution have diminished capacity to function optimally for student recruitment, learning, experience, or outcomes. It is profoundly important that academics understand and engage in the change management process in this new environment, regardless of their role or level of responsibility.

This article builds on my 2024 article, “Managing Change, Part 1: Pivoting into the Future,” and my 2022 piece, “Managing Change: Five Common Hindrances to Navigating Disruption in Higher Education.” The purpose is to provide more context for common hindrances and additional insight into the vital roles department chairs and deans play when it comes to their institutions' capacity to meet students' needs in this new epoch of higher education. Academic leaders can advocate for improved organizational change management expertise both to ensure that there is a collective understanding of how the organization works and its current capacity to accomplish desired goals and to foster collaboration between faculty and project implementers to problem-solve, innovate, and achieve goals.

Change management involves accurately assessing where you are, determining where you want to go, anticipating and mitigating the obstacles to getting there, and then transitioning methodically through obstacles to get to the desired outcome. It means understanding *how* people and organizations transition from one phase to another and managing expectations accordingly.

Change management habits should be integrated into existing planning activities and daily operations as a systematic approach to implementing new programs, policies, and changes in ways that maximize successful adoption and build agility to shift rapidly in a changing environment. It's not surprising that managing change was cited as “one of the toughest challenges I face as an administrator” by 72 percent of higher education administrators in a survey conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education and Watermark (Anft 2022).

On the surface, the unique impact of change on parts of each institution may seem distinct and separate, but organizations are a complex and complicated ecosystem of people, resources, systems, policies, procedures, processes, and culture. Figure 1 illustrates the distinct triad of major functions that comprise a higher education organization: academics, administration, and student affairs,

which are often led by three separate leaders such as the president, the provost or vice president of instruction, and the vice president of student services, respectively. In most other types of organizations, all the functions report up to one leader (president or CEO) who has final decision-making authority and accountability.

In higher education, typically two of the three leaders (administrative and academic) have ultimate decision-making authority for their respective areas. As a result, boundaries and accountabilities blur, and the resulting dynamic is often at the core of the five hindrances. In a shared governance structure, it can be difficult to engage administrators, academics, and student affairs professionals about the same topic, at the same time, at the same table. It's not uncommon for each group to focus so intently on their own areas that they forget that they're all inextricably bound. Therefore, all three leaders may make independent decisions that depend on the same resources and infrastructure without consideration of the connection with, or the impact on, the entire institution, which further diminishes institutional capacity.

The idea that the three groups may have equal value is often antithetical to academic sensibilities (and perhaps even offensive to some). However, a paradigm shift proposes that without the

**Figure 1. Academics, Administration, and Student Affairs**

