External mentoring for assistant professors

Many assistant professors find active mentors and colleagues on the Northwestern faculty, colleagues who provide valuable feedback on work in progress and who provide advice about the profession. Other junior faculty members may work in a field that is underrepresented at Northwestern or for other reasons desire advice from an external mentor in the field who is able to review a book manuscript or corpus of articles at a critical point in the probationary term. Weinberg College provides the option of a single, focused mentoring workshop and will cover half the documented expenses up to a total contribution of $1500. The Department would provide the other half of the needed funding. This combined amount should cover transportation, meals, hotel, and possibly a modest honorarium for an external faculty mentor to visit campus. Funds may be requested once per probationary term for each tenure-line assistant professor who would find this helpful. Please be in touch with Steven Cole in advance if your department wishes to consider hosting such a session.

The general framework is as follows:
- The junior colleague identifies one or possibly two senior members of the field whom he or she believes would be strong, constructive critics of the work in progress. The individual(s) should not have previous association with the candidate (e.g. graduate teacher, collaborator, etc.). The chair would make the contact, explain the program, and invite the faculty member to campus, offering to cover transportation, meals, and hotel. If appropriate, the Chair may also offer an honorarium of up to $300. A general budget for the travel portion should be discussed in advance to ensure shared expectations.
- If the individual accepts, a date is set for the visit to campus.
- The materials to be discussed should be sent to the external mentor(s) far enough in advance of the meeting to allow the mentor adequate time to read and critique the work.
- The mentor(s) should be expected to mark up the manuscript. During the visit, there should be a session which the candidate, a senior NU faculty member, and the mentor(s) attend to discuss issues raised by the work. Other Northwestern faculty may also be invited to listen in, depending on the colleague’s wishes.
- The senior NU colleague who is present should follow up with the junior colleague to continue the discussion and provide ongoing encouragement. It is especially important not to allow the session to have a paralyzing effect on progress, as may happen if the outside advice is bountiful.
- The priority for the visit goes to the workshop for the assistant professor. However the visitors may have some time to meet with students or other members of the faculty while they are in town.

Within this framework, there are variants on how the sessions might be held. Here are some comments from three junior faculty members who held such a session:

Colleague A brought in two external scholars and a senior critic from another NU department. A describes the session:

I chose to have an informal and private session rather than a public one. I originally intended a public session, but after consulting with colleagues, I was convinced a smaller and private discussion would be more productive for me. Indeed, a public session would have meant that critics would start by giving a
summary of my argument before criticizing it, and/or that I would need to circulate the manuscript to interested parties so that they have a look. After a 5 minute introduction by myself, the two external mentors each gave a 20 minute comment. We had planned to move on to a chapter by chapter discussion, but instead decided that I should answer the main points right away. The discussion took very interesting paths, and we decided to drop the tight schedule that we agreed upon at the beginning, and to focus on the main theoretical and methodological questions addressed by the book manuscript. Even though the discussion lasted 4 hours of intense discussion, we did not have time to really go over the empirical chapters one by one. This was not a problem as two of the reviewers gave me their annotated printed versions of the manuscript, so that I could see what their precise comments were. I think this is of great help as I revise the manuscript, and that others should ask panelists to do the same, provided that the extent panelists agree.

To sum up, first, I think the timing of this kind of session is essential. Ideally, it should come after one has already triggered the attention and interest of an editor with whom the author might want to discuss the comment, and that it should not come too late in the tenure track. Otherwise, the author won't have the time and energy to respond to the comments. Second, I think the interdisciplinary composition of the panel can be very rewarding (it was in my case), but that privacy rather than publicity of the meeting will ensure that comments remain focused on the manuscript.

Colleague B brought in two external scholars and invited a few people to be non-speaking members of the audience.

The visitors were incredibly helpful. Two scholars whom I chose read the manuscript. The workshop was just me, the two readers, the Chair, and a few people I invited (but it was open to faculty within the department). It was private, only—no public colloquium component, and I would leave it like that so that the sole focus of the senior invited scholars is the manuscript. The workshop was quite long, facilitated by the Chair, but mostly run by me. I had questions I had asked them about. They then gave me their copies of the manuscript with their notes on it, and/or a readers report. I incorporated the comments into my revisions (I already had a contract), and they made the book enormously better, and passed the next round of reader’s reports.

It’s great for post-docs and new faculty to attend (but not to speak). I would suggest requiring the audience members to write up readers reports (one did, one didn’t). Then we went to dinner after, which was a nice finish.

Colleague C is in an article field where it is important to bring in grant support. Because of the lack of close colleagues at NU, C invited one advisor to campus.

I decided on making it a private session where my external advisor only met with the chair and me. The focus of my meeting was to discuss my past and ongoing research in an area of common interest. As a result of the session, the external colleague and I decided to collaborate on writing a grant proposal. I used some of my start up money to travel to the external reviewer’s institution three times for further consultation on our joint project. A manuscript is currently in the early stage of preparation. I only wish I had arranged this visit earlier in my career here at NU.