I. Small Talk

Tony is finding his first semester as a tenure-track assistant professor verging on the overwhelming. Tony has found balancing course development, research, and departmental commitments a near impossible task. Tony has critically questioned his approach to his collegiate duties in an effort to find balance, but nothing has seemed to work.

Tony has also noticed that the lack of familiarity with the plethora of acronyms and programs at the college has made him feel somewhat of an outsider. Tony needs help, but feels uncomfortable revealing any apparent weakness to his peers.

Tony seems to get along well with the other faculty members in his department and at his institution, but he senses a lack of interest by his peers. Colleagues often stop by his office to inquire about how his semester is progressing. Tony’s replies of “not bad” or “ok” do not elicit much response from his colleagues. Tony’s replies always seem to end the conversation with the inquiring faculty member continuing on their way.

Tony realizes his colleagues are busy in the bustle of mid-semester, but he has begun to question the other faculty members’ interest in him and his performance. Tony’s confidence has dropped and he is now questioning his own aptitude for performing as an educator at a liberal arts institution. Tony sincerely wishes he had someone to talk to openly about his fears and reservations, but his own insecurities prevent him from approaching other faculty members, not to mention their apparent lack of interest.

- What approach could Tony take to find someone to talk openly with?
- Could this happen in your department? Has this happened in your department?

These mentoring case studies were developed by tenure-track faculty at St. Olaf College. They were originally used as the basis of a meeting of tenured faculty in the division of Natural Sciences & Mathematics.

The purpose was to raise awareness of mentoring issues among the senior faculty.

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II. The Right Fit

Bowser is just finishing up his first academic year as a tenure-track faculty member. He has enjoyed his interactions with students and is looking forward to the opportunity to focus on research during the upcoming summer. However, Bowser is finding that the hours he is working to satisfy his perfectionist tendencies are beginning to have consequences outside of work.

He is slowly coming to the realization that he will simply not be able to meet his own high expectations in every aspect of his job. The growing discomfort that Bowser feels with his own limitations is exacerbated by his uncertainty in the expectations of his department and peers.

All of this has raised questions in Bowser’s mind. “Why am I in this job? Is this the right place for me? Am I fulfilling what is expected of me?” Bowser would like to discuss these important questions with a trusted person but is not sure who would be appropriate.

He brings a list of names to his department chair, Daisy, who dismisses each of them in turn for various reasons. Daisy then suggests a few names that Bowser is not particularly comfortable with.

- Given the nature of a tenure-track position, are new faculty given appropriate guidance on job expectations in your department?
- Who could Bowser approach other than the chair?
- How should Daisy help Bowser to find someone?

III. Powerful Positivists

Rex is in his second year as a tenure-track faculty member, and feels fairly comfortable asking a number of his colleagues for advice and assistance when he needs it.

Now that he has been teaching at his undergraduate liberal arts college for almost two years, he has gotten to know many of the students there... the requests from his students for letters of recommendation are starting to rise. Rex is happy to help the students with their summer and post-graduate endeavors, and has written many such letters.

However, for the first time he has received a request from a student for whom he does not feel comfortable writing a letter. Before he emails the student back with his reply, he decides to walk down the hall and get advice from Fifi, a full professor in his department.

When Rex presents the situation briefly to Fifi, he expects an equally brief but pleasant reply about what she has done in such situations. After all, both faculty members have a lot of things fighting for their valuable time. Instead, Fifi thinks for a moment, then asks Rex to come in and chat because she thinks a lot about letters of recommendation and is interested in his thoughts on some issues.

They talk back and forth about what subtleties might be inadvertently included in their letters, what personal touches to include in letters, and of course when to decline a request for a letter... this latter topic leads to an interesting dialogue about the student-professor relationship and how and why the student often perceives the relationship to be much different than the faculty’s perception.

Rex leaves Fifi’s office with advice about his original question, but as he walks back down the hall to his own office, he realizes that Fifi had treated him like a valued colleague rather than a trainee.

It might have been much easier for her to offer some wisdom with a smile, but instead she took the time to learn from him as well. Rex smiles— maybe he is starting to fit in!

- What is the nature of most of your interactions with tenure-track colleagues? Tenured colleagues?
- Do you think the type of positive interaction described above can be planned, or does it have to arise naturally over topics of true interest to the faculty members?
IV. Mentor Search

Tabatha is in the midst of her second year of a tenure-track position in a well-respected department on campus. To date her teaching evaluations have been very positive and from every indication it appears that her array of scholarship activities are well underway. She had a solid summer research experience with three undergraduate students. Their poster, displayed outside the lab, consistently draws the attention of a few students each day.

This year Tabatha has been facing a challenge; even with all the past success, the time at the institution has brought up more feelings of insecurity rather than a sense of fitting into the department, let alone the institution. It’s really starting to bother her. To help address her growing needs she is trying to identify a person that she can talk to about some concerns.

To make matters more complicated Harry, a colleague returning from a two-year faculty exchange with a biotech firm, has become the department chair. She knows very little about her new department leader, except that he is well grounded in the political machinery at the institution.

Over the past few months Tabatha has found it difficult to talk with Harry; even though, he frequently stops by Tabatha’s lab to inquire about how things are going. There is something about him that just doesn’t mesh with her when it comes to sensitive conversations.

This tension seems to fuel Tabatha’s increasing anxiety about her place at the institution. She is wondering how she will ever find someone to talk to without involving Harry, and the potential political fallout if she does find someone without his assistance.

- Can you envision this happening at your institution? In your department?
- Is insecurity a common feeling among tenure-track faculty? Among tenured faculty?
- How would you feel if you were in Tabatha’s position?
- How would you feel if you were in Harry’s position?
- What are some possible actions that could be taken by Tabatha, by Harry, or by others at the institution to help this situation?