

Just One More Thing:

Structured Research Mentoring for Junior Faculty in Economics

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Abstract

Since January 2022 I have been running a program of structured research mentoring for economics-trained assistant professors at Harvard Business School. In this article, I describe some of our goals, practices, and takeaways. I hope that reporting on these can be useful to others involved in the mentoring of new economists.

Introduction

Since January 2022 I have been running a program of structured mentoring for economics-trained assistant professors at Harvard Business School. Many colleagues at other institutions, both junior and senior faculty, have asked me how it works. So, in this article, I will explain the goals I had in mind when setting it up, how we decided to organize it, and some of what I have learned.

I do not presume that the way we organize mentoring is the best or only way to do it. I also know that faculty at different institutions will have different needs. By giving the reasoning behind our choices, I hope to make it easier for others to adapt them to suit other environments. I also hope that this article can help to catalyze professional conversations about research mentoring for economists recently out of graduate programs.

Some of the ideas here may be useful outside of universities, for example, in the government agencies, think-tanks, and private companies that employ research economists. Partly for this reason, and partly because the focus of our structured mentoring activities has been on research, I will not touch here on the (very important) topics of mentoring junior faculty in their roles as teachers and professional citizens.

As I will detail later, an important element of mentoring is fostering trust. Accordingly, one thing I will not do in this article is describe the details of any of the research, challenges, or even triumphs that my colleagues and I have discussed during our mentoring sessions.

¹ I am grateful to all of the junior colleagues who have worked with me these last years. These mentoring activities have been one of the most fun and rewarding parts of my career.

Context and Goals

A lot of structure is lost in the transition from PhD student to assistant professor. While many departments have regular reviews of junior faculty, and even formal mentorship programs, these typically offer far less scaffolding than the combination of program milestones and dissertation advising available in a healthy graduate program. To generalize a bit, between graduate school and an assistant professorship, economists go from the expectation that they will meet regularly with multiple advisors to discuss their entire dissertation, to the expectation that they can request occasional meetings with senior faculty to discuss particular topics.

The social structure changes, too. Few assistant professors will have a cohort of direct peers as large as they did in graduate school. They and their peers are more likely to have families and other commitments. Late night group problem-set sessions are gone.

With the decline of structure comes greater freedom and opportunity. The tenure clock may give a long runway to start new, ambitious projects. Assistant professors may have access to student research assistants, funds to purchase data or to travel for research, centralized computing facilities, and so on. Invitations to conferences and research seminars open up new possibilities for collaboration.

Hanging over all of this is the tenure process. Again, to oversimplify a bit, a student's advisors will advocate for them when it comes time to apply for faculty positions. An assistant professor's senior colleagues will help decide whether they keep their job. These feel different.

Mentoring cannot, and probably should not, reverse all these changes. Exercising the greater freedom of a faculty position is how many economists achieve their greatest research impact.

Instead, as I see it, the goal of a program of research mentoring for junior faculty is to ease the transition from graduate school by helping new faculty to replace some of the structure they've lost, and to find their footing amidst the new opportunities they've found.

Accordingly, we wanted our program to have a few features. First, we expect active participation. Participants should feel that mentoring is something they should receive regularly, not something they may request exceptionally.

Second, the program should help to foster community. Participants should learn from one another and develop or strengthen relationships with their colleagues.

Third, the program should offer input at all stages of the research pipeline, from the early conception of a project to its later movement through the publication process.

Fourth, the program should embrace challenges and failure as an essential and expected part of the research process. Some early-stage projects will not mature. Some late-stage projects will be

rejected from journals. These experiences are typical, rather than aberrant. We need to talk about them to learn from them and to make good decisions about what to do next.

Format and Structure

During the semester, we meet regularly as a group. Each session is divided into slots of roughly thirty minutes. There is a sign-up sheet. I nudge people to sign up if they haven't participated in a while.

We have two formats. One is called "big picture." It's ideal for an early-stage project or idea. The participant has about five minutes to present about five slides. The slides should tell us the goal of the research, the main methods and findings, and the questions the participant is hoping that we (the group) can help them to answer.

I guide the discussion with a few goals in mind. One is to keep us on track and make sure we hit some of the key points the participant has teed up for us. Another is to make sure everyone is on the same page about the goals and methods, especially if these are particular to a subfield and not as familiar to those working in other areas.

Whenever possible, I also try to probe to see where there are opportunities to add depth to the study. Early in my career, and still today, my mentors and collaborators helped me by pushing me to take my project one step further than I thought I could. Finding that "just one more thing" is one of the most valuable things that can come out of a big picture session, and it is why I gave the program its name.

The other format is called "small picture." It's ideal for a later-stage project. The participant shares a document that the group reads quietly for a few minutes. Sometimes the document is a referee report. Sometimes it is the revised introduction of a paper. The document usually ends with the participant's goals for the discussion.

My role here is similar to that in the big picture format, but in a small-picture session I try deliberately to keep the discussion narrow. Small-picture discussions are about mature projects. We're not looking to reimagine the research, but rather to chart an actionable course towards the project's successful completion in roughly its present form.

Another difference is that, unlike in a big-picture session, a small picture-session might involve discussion of the peer review process. Here I occasionally interject with some lessons from my experiences. (I like to remind my junior colleagues that I have had a lot more papers rejected than they have.)

During the summer, when group sessions become harder to arrange, I switch to one-on-one meetings. In these meetings I try to focus on the participant's overall research agenda, and

especially their progress in publishing their work. I find these topics harder to tackle in a group setting, and it's useful to be able to step back from the details of particular projects, look at the whole, and set goals for the upcoming academic year. These one-on-one conversations also help me to stay informed about each participant's research agenda, which I find useful in guiding group discussions during the semester.

Lessons and Takeaways

While some things about the program turned out more or less as I expected, others have been surprising. Here are some of the main things I have learned.

Talking Helps with Thinking

Many times, participants have told me that just preparing for one of these sessions was already very helpful for their work, even before the discussion started. I think that happens for two reasons.

First, the big picture format forces the participant to distill the essence of their project for a non-specialist audience. Doing this helps the participant clarify, for themselves, what is most important about their project. And, if this is hard to do, that fact alone may expose weaknesses of the project's conception.

Second, the small picture format forces the participant to clarify what they want to know. Sometimes when we feel stuck on a project it is because we are not clear, for ourselves, on what is the main sticking point. Being asked to bring a set of targeted discussion points to a group can help to clear away that fog. Often I find that participants already know the answers to many of the questions they bring to the group; what they really needed was a push to formulate the right question.

You Are Not the Only One with that Question

I organized mentoring as a group activity because I thought that participants would learn from one another as well as from me. That has turned out to be even more true than I expected. It routinely happens that one participant faces a research challenge that another has already confronted. Even participants working on seemingly very different topics may find that their work has methodological or other elements in common.

Just as valuable as learning that someone else has the answer to your question is learning that someone else has the same question. For all the reasons I discuss above, becoming a new assistant professor can be isolating. Realizing that someone else--or even everyone else--faces the same challenges can make it less so.

Conclusions

Junior faculty are not graduate students, but they recently have been. Recognizing that fact helps clarify some of the things that mentoring can accomplish. I have found mentoring in a group setting to be especially effective. Even for those who wish to take a different approach, I hope this article offers some useful ideas, or can at least serve as a conversation-starter at your institution.