

## COMMENTARY

# The Importance of Mentors During Preboarding, Orientation, and Onboarding of New Faculty During a Global Pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

Recruitment of new faculty requires a significant investment of time, effort, and money, so it is important to set up new faculty for short and long-term success in their new role.<sup>1</sup> One way to do this is to have new faculty participate in a formal onboarding process as it can increase a new employee's retention after three years by 69%.<sup>1,2</sup> In addition to increasing retention, a formal onboarding program can help new hires reach productivity two months earlier than nonparticipants.<sup>3,4</sup> This is an important outcome since the first 90 days are a crucial time period for new hires to become functional, engaged, integrated, focused, and productive.<sup>5</sup>

Onboarding is the process of assimilating new employees into an organization, including facilitating relationship formation; clarifying expectations, roles, priorities, and metrics; showing how to access resources; reviewing the organizations' culture, goals, mission, and vision; and providing development opportunities.<sup>3</sup> The process begins on a new employees' first day. Due to the gap between the hire and start date in jobs like academia, onboarding programs should include pre-employment onboarding (preboarding) as well.<sup>1,3</sup>

Relatedly, orientation is a part of onboarding and is concerned with the technical aspects of the job such as payroll, parking, benefits, ID badges, credentialing, and computer access.<sup>3</sup> Orientation is an important part of onboarding as it sets the tone for new employees' transitions and shapes their impression of and relationship to the organization.<sup>3</sup> Overall, successful onboarding and orientation programs can lead to increased satisfaction and retention of new faculty.<sup>1</sup>

Under ordinary conditions it is important for a college/university to have a formal onboarding process in place, but during a global pandemic it is crucial. Colleges should evaluate their existing onboarding and orientation programs to identify areas of improvement. They should also consider including a structured preboarding process to better connect new faculty, especially those that interviewed virtually during the pandemic since they may have missed the interpersonal communication that can occur in an interview. Programs should also consider formally assigning a mentor for each area (preboarding, orientation, and onboarding) to help better guide their new faculty during a time when forming relationships and settling into a new environment are compromised. Failure to explicitly identify these three mentors for new faculty can lead everyone to assume that someone else is doing it, which can result in a lack of intentional support and guidance for the new faculty member. The department chair is instrumental in the process of identifying potential mentors and arranging training, as mentor training is becoming more available.<sup>6</sup> The mentors that are identified should be available, engaged, and interested in investing in guiding, supporting, and developing new faculty.<sup>7</sup> He or she should be knowledgeable enough to point new faculty to the right resources and connected enough to serve as a bridge to teaching, research, or service collaborations. Relatedly, the mentee (ie, the new faculty member) should be open-minded and receptive to input, reflective about and assertive in identifying his/her needs, and committed to communicating. The following sections offer recommendations for the specific role mentors can serve and adjustments that could be made for the preboarding, orientation, and onboarding for new faculty as a result of COVID-19.

### *Preboarding Mentors during COVID-19*

For faculty candidates looking for a job during COVID-19, recruitment has most likely looked very different with Zoom interviews in lieu of in-person interviews. The absence of an in-person first and even second interview can be

challenging for faculty candidates as they may be missing details that facilitate accepting a new job offer such as exploring the area, looking at real estate, eating out with faculty hosts, and interacting with the department and students. If a faculty candidate accepts an offer, especially an out-of-state position, the department chair should identify a preboarding mentor as soon as possible to help fill the void left from a virtual interview process. Assigning a preboarding mentor can be helpful even for a person who completed an in-person interview, especially if he/she is relocating to a new area without an existing social or familial network, as the need for support and guidance is high during this transition time.

To facilitate a good mentor fit, the new faculty member (ie, mentee) should identify important moving and relocation priorities and questions. For example, the new faculty member may have school-aged children and a mentor with children may be a good match because he/she could discuss possible communities to live in and desirable school-districts that are available. While some new faculty may want to move early to unpack and explore the new town, relocating during COVID-19 may require quarantining upon arrival and adjusted timelines. Due to social distancing and decreased gatherings, new faculty may have a limited opportunity to meet new people in their community. The preboarding mentor could suggest alternate ways to explore the new town and engage with the community such as recommending popular restaurants with take-out dining options, safe outdoor adventures, scenic drives, and drive-in movie theaters. Overall, while welcoming new faculty during a pandemic can present challenges, a preboarding mentor can be an excellent resource during this acclimation period.

### *Orientation Mentors during COVID-19*

During the pandemic it is crucial for department chairs to explicitly identify who is serving as the orientation mentor for the new faculty member since many orientation requirements may have changed. This formal mentor may be the department secretary or human resources manager since they typically serve this role and are knowledgeable about orientation. For example, the orientation mentor can help a new faculty member who is moving from another state, to apply for taking the state licensure exams. Given the current pandemic, this assistance is important since it is vital to sign up as early as possible in order to be licensed in time to start the job. The orientation mentor can also assist new faculty on their first day of work by helping them to 1) complete required paperwork (eg, benefits, timesheets, payroll, and HR training); 2) acquire an employee ID badge; gain office, building, and practice site keys/access cards; 3) identify IT support for secure, encrypted, wifi an on-and-off campus network connections; 4) access library and VPN networks; 5) secure computer passwords, equipment, supplies, and parking permits; and 6) obtain and set up an office.<sup>8</sup>

The orientation mentor can also help new faculty complete credentialing paperwork in order to acquire practice site privileges. The practice site, university, and each department may have separate orientations, so the orientation mentor can quickly notify new faculty of these dates and explain how to access the orientations such as whether they are live, recorded, or virtually delivered. Helping new faculty schedule and attend orientation is important because there may be a limited number of orientation dates available and failure to attend orientation may interfere with a faculty member getting credentialed in a timely fashion.

During the pandemic, the department chair may also want to consider identifying a second orientation mentor to serve as an additional resource for new faculty beyond the assistance described above. This additional orientation mentor's role may be more informal with the aim of welcoming the new faculty member, helping answer questions, and even just serving as a friendly face for lunch or coffee or a regular check-in, which may be vitally important if few people are working in the building and many are working from home.

### *Onboarding Mentors during COVID-19*

Traditionally, identifying a mentor for career development can be highly beneficial and may result in higher career satisfaction.<sup>9,10</sup> Having an onboarding mentor is an important first step in career development. Prior to COVID-19, faculty and staff may have been easily accessible to new faculty to answer questions. Now, many colleagues may be working from home, and a new faculty member may be unsure of who to ask for help. An onboarding mentor can serve as a "sponsor" whose job it is to facilitate introductions by connecting, advocating, and using their influence to make recommendations.<sup>11</sup> Onboarding mentors should serve as a bridge for early relationship formation and formally introduce the new faculty member to faculty, staff, and students to decrease the guesswork behind "the new person in the building." The onboarding mentor can augment these introductions by suggesting or arranging meetings with specific faculty, committee chairs, and administrators to help him/her get to know the college and/or department and its specialties. Traditionally, these introductions could be accomplished through informal lunches or coffee, but now may be replaced with virtual meetings. The orientation mentor can set up virtual happy hours with the department or individual faculty members, which can be a great way to cultivate a sense of community, camaraderie, and understanding for the new faculty member.<sup>12</sup> By doing this, the onboarding mentor can encourage others to invest in the new faculty member, make him/her feel welcomed, and promote future collaborations.

Furthermore, with the pandemic, it may be difficult for incoming faculty to be aware of the expectations and culture of the college, especially related to working during COVID-19. The onboarding mentor can serve as a “guide” whose job it is to explain how things are done at the college, help new faculty find their way, and learn the institutional history.<sup>11</sup> As a guide, the onboarding mentor can give valuable insight to the College’s pre-COVID-19 work environment and expectations and how it may have changed. For example, the mentor can explain if work-from-home and one-on-one virtual meetings are encouraged or if the culture is to be present in one’s office and make attempts to physically distance when meeting. The mentor can also highlight essential department, college, and university meetings to attend, when and where they are held, and which meetings are optional. Onboarding mentors can provide an understanding for what is accepted, expected, and what to expect from others.

The onboarding mentor should advocate new faculty members to self-reflect and assess areas in which they would like more assistance and training. For example, if starting a practice site, new faculty could observe other clinical pharmacists who are performing similar tasks, have discussions with administration about practice site goals to focus on and timelines, and identify expectations for both the practice site and the College. The onboarding mentor may also be able to help the new faculty identify additional mentors in the college or on campus they would like to learn from. Onboarding mentors, with oversight from the department chair, may even help the new faculty member set a list of feasible new goals to achieve throughout the next year. This is an important task especially during the pandemic, as some goals may not be as easily achievable as they were in the past. For example, faculty members may need to delay promotion due to COVID-19. New faculty may have to alter their timelines for precepting, establishing a practice site, conducting face-to-face patient visits, conducting research, obtaining national grants, building a local, regional, or national presence, or giving a presenting at local or national meetings.

One additional role that the onboarding mentor could serve is that of an active listener. As an active listener, they can serve as a mentor who can ask the new faculty how things are going and they can listen, advise, relate, support, and encourage.<sup>11</sup> Starting a new job is a major life stressor, which is compounded during COVID-19.<sup>13,14</sup> Being a good listener does not mean that the mentor should be a counselor or problem-solver. However the mentor can solicit the new faculty member’s worries and apprehensions, guide them to resources, encourage them to be proactive and assertive about their needs and concerns, and advocate that they begin seeking additional mentorship for each of the aspects of the tripartite mission with a focus on promotion and/or tenure. The mentor can recommend follow-up meetings with specific individuals. They can also reassure the new faculty member if frustrations or barriers arise.

## CONCLUSION

A new faculty member’s reality during COVID-19 may include making extra effort to meet with people due to closed doors or off-site personnel, facing limited on-site staff help and closed resource offices (e.g. IT, notaries, financial, etc.). Asking for help isn’t as simple as walking to the office next door, as now it involves navigating proper channels and sending multiple emails to find a simple answer. It is also more difficult to get to know people, as in order to do so, one would likely have to set up a meeting. This puts a strain on new faculty as they are in their own silos, and it is difficult to grasp one’s roles and responsibilities, what is mandatory vs. what is optional, what is frowned upon and what would be appreciated. Because the connections are hard to make, it’s even more difficult for new faculty to find their go-to network for assistance without putting themselves into a vulnerable state.

Most colleges make significant investments to recruit and hire new faculty, but once new faculty are hired, a structured and intentional preboarding, orientation, and onboarding program may be lacking and new faculty may not be assigned mentors to specifically address this early time frame. Instead mentors may be assigned after faculty get settled or the focus is on promotion and tenure or the tripartite mission specifically. Now more than ever, new faculty can benefit from preboarding, orientation, and onboarding mentors who serve as bridges and ambassadors to all aspects of the university. Without them, new faculty may get lost in the competing priorities universities are facing during the pandemic, which can alter their successful transition to and trajectory across their early career.

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