There are many elements involved in orienting new tenure-track faculty to a university like USC. We want to make sure that they understand expectations for research and publishing. We want them to consider the ways in which they may contribute to the strategic plan of the University and their department or school. We are sometimes eager to share our thoughts on the culture of our units, the personalities of our colleagues, and structures of authority at the University.

Do we do as good a job mentoring our new faculty in teaching excellence?

There are reasons to think that we may be less attentive to this issue than to others. Some may be deterred by lingering questions about the relative importance of teaching in the ultimate tenure decision, or by a sense that a basic level of competence is all that should be expected. Others may feel that teaching is more a matter of personality than teachable technique and thus is more difficult to improve with mentoring. If a faculty member seems to be performing at a basically competent level there may be a feeling that the classroom is his or her private domain and that stronger mentoring might amount to inappropriate intrusion.

Before succumbing to these arguments it would be appropriate to think more about what mentoring teaching excellence at USC might involve. In this brief module, let me raise three issues –

1. evaluating classroom competency
2. devising strategies for improvement
3. discussing special teaching opportunities

– in the hope that they help open up a larger conversation about other ways in which we can orient new faculty to our expectations about their responsibilities as teachers.

**Evaluating Classroom Competency**

Even those who are inclined to pay less attention to teaching excellence agree that we have an obligation to evaluate the level of competency demonstrated by new faculty in the classroom. There are of course many ways to conduct such evaluation. For example, it is the practice within the Department of Political Science for the Chair to assign a mentor to a new faculty member, and among the many responsibilities of this mentor is the obligation to review course syllabi and student evaluations, visit classrooms, and provide feedback on the structure of the class and the effectiveness of teaching style.

While new faculty often receive written information about such things as the elements of an acceptable syllabus or grading policies, it usually comes amidst a flood of other written information. Therefore, there is no substitute for a specific review of their actual practices.
Moreover, when new faculty members are required to talk about their classroom effectiveness, they will have a unique opportunity to reflect on their teaching and how it might be improved. The mere act of setting up the conversation can trigger productive self-evaluation (whether or not the mentor provides extensive comments or suggestions for improvement), and this would seem to be an essential part of the professional development of young faculty.

These conversations also provide a unique chance to discuss specific issues that arise with the USC student body, and are thus part of the process by which new faculty become acculturated to this University.

**Devising Strategies for Improvement**

There may be many advantages to a more careful review of classroom performance, but one of the most important results would be a determination that a new faculty member needs to improve in this area.

Of course, all of us could improve; even the best teachers think of ways in which they can more effectively engage students. In fact, some of the most productive programs put on by the Center for Excellence in Teaching (CET) are aimed at good teachers looking for new ideas, and this might apply to very good new faculty as well.

Still, what is the best way to respond when there is a perception that someone should be doing a better job?

Here is where more focused mentoring by strong teachers in one’s discipline can be especially important. Departments and schools should have procedures in place whereby early and sustained feedback can lead to discernible improvements well before the tenure year approaches. New faculty should not be put in a position where they are told there is a potential problem but are not given the support structure they need in order to adequately address it.

However, in some circumstances new faculty may feel resistant to this kind of strong mentoring from members of their own department. There may be some concern that this level of feedback is inextricably linked to an ongoing process of evaluation and surveillance, and if this is the case than a procedure that should be purely constructive can be turned against the person it is designed to help.

School or department administrators can avoid this development in a number of ways, but among the options that are available is the use of CET. The Faculty Fellows associated with CET represent a wide variety of disciplines and are all available to act as teaching mentors in a way that is completely confidential and non-evaluative. Administrators may want to consider whether this resource is useful for them as they try to deal effectively with some of the challenges presented by new faculty. Even if schools or departments have strong internal procedures in place for addressing these issues new faculty should be made aware of this additional external resource and should be encouraged to take advantage of it, regardless of their level of competency.
In addition to personal mentoring, CET also has an ongoing program of seminars, luncheons, and institutes for faculty interested in discussing ways of improving the classroom experience. For example, the programs often include how to lead discussion groups and how to run large lecture classes. The Center is also interested in hearing from administrators about what kinds of programs would be most useful in helping them mentor their new faculty.

Still, whether the procedure draws on purely internal resources or on larger University resources, there should be strategies in place to respond to situations where new faculty could benefit from greater attention to their performance in the classroom.

**Discussing Special Teaching Opportunities**

Mentoring teaching excellence, though, is not just about putting out fires. It is also about ensuring that new faculty understand all of the opportunities available to them as teachers at this University. Many of our best researchers believe that some of their most satisfying work is done in the classroom. The tenure process is commonly thought of as a chance for us to think about whether we want a new faculty member to join our ranks, but we need to keep in mind that it is also a time when excellent young scholars are considering whether they want to make a career with us. If they love teaching, they should know about the various ways in which that passion can be nurtured and indulged at USC.

The members of particular schools and departments are in the best position to know what opportunities are most viable in light of the other responsibilities of a tenure-track faculty in their fields. In some cases there may be exciting teaching opportunities outside of one’s particular department. In the College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, for example, some faculty are invited to teach in the special freshman honors program, Thematic Option. Here one finds extremely talented and motivated freshman in challenging interdisciplinary classes.

In other cases specific schools or departments may provide opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching or team teaching. Course development, as part of one’s major or a new minor, may also be encouraged, especially when a young scholar comes to us with an innovative research agenda that deserves a classroom outlet. There are also programs available to work with undergraduates outside of the classroom, as research assistants, as members of student organizations, or as students looking for enthusiastic mentors.
Conclusion

There are other issues that deserve more attention, such as clarifying one’s role as a mentor of graduate students, exploring innovative uses of technology in the classroom, protecting one’s intellectual property from new web-based note-takers, and understanding academic integrity at USC. Perhaps, though, raising a limited set of issues in this module gives us all a chance to think harder about how well we are addressing this important professional responsibility.

If you believe your department or school is doing a particularly good job at mentoring new faculty in teaching excellence, it would be very useful for the rest of us if you were to share your model. We could all benefit.

On the other hand, if this is an area in which you think you can be more attentive, then I hope that this module provides you and your colleagues an opportunity to make some changes that can have an important impact on our junior colleagues – and our students.