

Job Coaches Help Get Professors Back on Track.

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Anastasia C. Curwood, in her first year on the faculty at Vanderbilt University, couldn't seem to carve out time to work on her book about African-American marriages. Carla Freeman, an Emory University professor at work on her second book, had tried unsuccessfully to write every day. Elizabeth S. Chilton, a new department chair at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, often found herself writing anything but the book she started five years ago.

In the publish-or-perish world of colleges and universities, writing is incredibly important because without published work professors don't get promoted and never earn tenure. Some, including these three, are turning to outsiders called faculty coaches to help them overcome this career killer.

"There's this myth that we're all effortlessly proceeding," Ms. Curwood says. "We all know that's not always how it is."

Faculty coaches, often clinical psychologists, focus on helping professors thrive in the ivory tower. Much of what the coaches do revolves around breaking down barriers to writing. But they also can help professors navigate departmental politics; strike the right balance of research, teaching, and service; maneuver the tenure process; and even find new jobs.

"Professors have difficulty maintaining their productivity on long-term projects that don't have deadlines," says Gina J. Hiatt, a clinical psychologist and founder of a coaching business called the Academic Ladder. "They can become anxious, desperate, and depressed."

"Everybody's so competitive, of course, so people feel they can't talk to other people about their struggles," she says. "They say they're fine, but they're not."

Ms. Curwood realized in 2005 when she came to Vanderbilt as an assistant professor of African-American and diaspora studies that she was struggling to find time to write on a regular basis. "I said right away, I need to get some help with this sooner rather than later," says Ms. Curwood. She found Ms. Hiatt, whose specialty is encouraging professors to write, online after reading an article she had written.

The two talked by telephone, and later Ms. Curwood began individual coaching sessions. At the time, she was turning her dissertation into a book on African-American marriages between the two world wars.

Although images of the two sitting on comfy couches and sipping lattes while hashing through the complexities of academic life may come to mind, in reality, faculty coaches typically use the telephone and e-mail to reach out to their clients. Ms. Curwood remembers completing an online form before each 45-minute session to let Ms. Hiatt know what had gone well with her writing that week, and what had not. The two would then talk by phone, mostly about the writing process. Ms. Hiatt's mantra, enforced gently but firmly: Write something every day.

At first, Ms. Curwood started with just 15 minutes of daily writing -- "that was when I was feeling pretty spread thin," she says. "If I had a teaching day, I would try to do it in the morning. Sometimes, teaching preparation would take over, but I would do it before I left the office." The slow and steady approach has resulted in a book that her publisher has returned to her for revisions.

Ms. Curwood has since moved to group coaching by teleconference. She and three other professors spend an hour on the phone each week with Ms. Hiatt discussing their goals, what they have done to accomplish them, and, of course, what they still need to do. Ms. Curwood says she plans to stay connected to the members of her group for "as long as possible."

When Ms. Curwood comes across colleagues at Vanderbilt who need help producing articles or manuscripts, she tells them about the benefits of coaching. But many professors aren't as open about using coaches. In a culture where people are so fiercely independent, giving in to the urge to seek outside help isn't always a popular move -- especially when the situation at hand could derail a professor's career.

Anonymity Helps

Confidentiality and being an impartial listener help, says Mary McKinney, founder of a coaching business called Successful Academic. One longtime client of hers, a professor at an Ivy League institution whom she dubs a "superstar," meets with her by phone to vent about "all sorts of little political problems" at his college, she says. "Unlike their spouse, I don't get bored listening to it, and I remember every little detail," says Ms. McKinney, also a clinical psychologist.

Another important plus for clients is that coaches are outside of the official college circle. "They can just lay out the situation and they know I'm not in academe and it's safe," Ms. Hiatt says.

Ms. Chilton says the anonymity extended to participants in a recent online writing group that Ms. Hiatt led at the University of Massachusetts was freeing. "We all felt

comfortable saying, 'I'm having trouble with this,' or 'I really had a horrible writing day,'" says Ms. Chilton, chair of the anthropology department.

In this business, there are no boot-camp-style tactics. Coaches bring one part thoughtful questioning, one part reverse peer pressure, and one part individual pep rally to the table.

"People don't experience it as 'Oh, my God, he just told me I have to do this and now I've got to do it or else!'" says Steve Reiter, the founder of Success in Academe, another coaching business. "It feels very much like a conversation with a trusted friend."

Sessions tend to run from 45 minutes to an hour at a cost of about \$130 per session. Ms. Hiatt, in an attempt to lower costs for cash-strapped professors, offers group coaching at \$40 a session for each weekly teleconference. She charges \$60 a month for an online writing club. Ms. McKinney says she has more female than male clients, which could be attributed to women generally being more willing to seek out the kind of help that coaches offer.

Sometimes coaches are brought in not by professors but by their institutions, and that removes what could be a financial obstacle for some faculty members. Officials at Emory University, for instance, brought Ms. Hiatt's writing program to the institution last summer and this one.

Overcoming Skepticism

Carla Freeman, an associate professor of women's studies at Emory, was on research leave at the time to work on her second book, a study of middle-class entrepreneurs in Barbados. Her problem: She spends too much time taking notes and reading, as opposed to actually writing. "As a result," she says, "if I have a deadline, -- panic-stricken, intense writing is how I've always done it."

She admits she was skeptical of the program, which called for professors to log in daily to a Web site to "check in" and to set writing goals online for all in the group to see. But those things did the trick for Ms. Freeman. During the one-month program that consisted of an online component, group coaching, and on-site workshops, Ms. Freeman wrote two new book chapters -- ones she had been avoiding because they were "tough ones" -- and drafted two more.

When it comes to choosing a faculty coach, Ms. McKinney recommends one who is also a clinical psychologist. "You at least know they are licensed and trained to meet certain standards for that level of mental-health professional," she says. And, of course, they must be well-versed in all the challenges that academics face in their careers. Ask specific questions about their experience with academics; a coach who doesn't know the meaning of "tenure" isn't the one for you.

Such knowledge is helpful for the other issues that faculty coaches find themselves guiding professors through. Mr. Reiter talks of clients at a crossroads, debating with

themselves on whether to leave academe behind in search of better work-life balance. Ms. Hiatt has worked with junior professors who in their first years as faculty members said the path to tenure was too fuzzy at their institutions and they were worried that "if I keep going at this rate, I won't be able to get it," she says.

Although a coach cannot guarantee success, for some professors having one can make the goal line seem a lot easier to reach.

WHEN TO CALL A FACULTY COACH

Junior professors, midcareer faculty members, and even the most seasoned of academics sometimes need help with managing at least one aspect of their careers. Here are a few signs of when you might need to give a faculty coach a call:

- * You're mired in a departmental battle.
- * You can only work under deadline pressure.
- * You've allowed teaching and service work to take up all of your time.
- * You're a chronic procrastinator.
- * You start papers but never finish them.
- * You're baffled by putting together a promotion and tenure portfolio.
- * You can't find time to do research. * You avoid writing at all costs.
- * You're not clear on the expectations for tenure.
- * You need help maintaining momentum.

SOURCE: Successful Academic, The Academic Ladder, Success in Academe

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