

4 Strategies for Closing the Coaching Gap for Mid-Level Academic Leaders

April 3, 2018 | [David Kiel](#)



While executive and administrative leaders have had a longer history of [working with coaches](#), there is growing awareness of the benefit to middle managers in higher education, as well.

Mid-level academic leaders are often promoted to leadership positions with limited management experience and without the benefit of training and professional leadership development. Yet mid-level leaders face significant barriers to the use of coaching.

To build leadership capacity at the mid level, it's critical that senior leaders take action to address this coaching gap.

To learn more, we turned to David Kiel, who worked for 15 years as a faculty leadership developer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is now a consultant to leadership development programs in higher education. Dr. Kiel has conducted extensive research on coaching in higher education, and the article that follows adapts and reworks material from an article the author published in the Journal of Excellence in College Teaching's special issue "Coaching and Leadership in Academia," James Sibley and Susan Robison, Editors, that came out in February 2018. The title of the original article is "In Search of Good Coaching for Mid-Level Faculty Leaders" (The full citation can be found in the reference section at the end of this article).

This revised and adapted version of Dr. Kiel's article addresses the needs of all academic leaders: faculty and non-faculty alike.

Why Mid-Level Academic Leaders Need Coaching

Mid-level academic leaders (e.g., department chairs, center directors, program heads, associate deans, mid-level non-faculty administrators, or even associate vice presidents) are key to implementing needed changes in institutions of higher education, but they face the challenges of multiple competing demands and complex job responsibilities. Academic administrators need to set expectations, mediate demands from senior leaders, manage conflicts between staff, students, and faculty, and handle issues of non-performance. They need to make decisions, delegate authority, create a positive work environment, and enrich staff opportunities for growth and development. They may have to deal with alcoholism, sexual harassment, mental illness, or illegal behavior.

Chairs and other academic leaders also need to recruit and retain qualified faculty and staff, and foster productivity and career development. They and other academic leaders need to manage the money, raise more money, be innovative and entrepreneurial, and think long term. Ideally they are also good change managers and coaches to their own staff and can reach out to other groups within and outside the institution to create partnerships and collaborations.

That is a long “to-do list,” and many items on that list will be difficult for someone who has spent his or her days studying medieval art, polymer chemistry, exercise and sports medicine, or romance languages — i.e., the typical academic paths by which faculty members rise to positions of leadership. These new responsibilities are also challenging for leaders who have risen to hold administrative positions in finance, facilities, development, IT, HR, legal and other administrative specialties but who have not had the benefit of basic leadership training and mentoring, or who have not had management experience. These mid-level leaders may also need to develop the skills to create new partnerships and coalitions that emerging strategies may require.

These professionals typically lack formal training in leadership and are thrust into situations for which they have little or no preparation. Even when training and leadership education is provided, the participant may face challenges in applying what they have learned on the job.

On-going coaching support can make the difference between just learning and actually doing. [Sanaghan and Woodstock \(2015\) report](#) that coaches can help new academic leaders in several important areas: managing boundaries, dealing with loneliness, and transitioning to a new identity as a leader. They observe that new leaders may feel unreasonable pressure for quick results, lack self-confidence and be overly self-critical. New leaders may not fully understand their role or be trained in its particulars when they take office. New leaders cannot take too many problems to their deans who are likely to be over-stretched themselves. New leaders also don't want to seem too “needy.” An effective coach—whether from HR, an outside professional, a mentor, or a peer leader—is a safer outlet.

However, mid-level leaders are less likely than senior level leaders to have the resources to hire in executive coaches to meet their needs. This creates a “coaching gap” at the mid level that needs to be addressed.

How Coaching Can Help

There is now significant evidence and widespread experience demonstrating that effective coaching can make a positive difference for mid-level leaders at colleges and universities and can lead to

better outcomes for their institutions. Two types of coaching especially can make a difference: **behavioral** and **situational**.

Behavioral coaches help clients self-assess and then (as needed) help them deploy new leadership and management behaviors that are likely to be more effective than their default patterns of leading and managing. Academic leaders may need to become more assertive or responsive, learn how to say “no,” let go of perfectionism, listen better, learn self-management skills, or broaden their leadership style and presence. Coaches who focus on behavior are often professionally trained and certified. They use 360-degree surveys and personality tests to help the leader gather feedback from others, and they deploy various counseling strategies to help leaders change their behavior in key interpersonal encounters with staff, colleagues, and superiors.

Situational coaches have experience or training relative to the specific situations the leader is facing. Situational coaching may include clarifying relevant policies, identifying options, warning of lurking dangers, and recounting similar situations and outcomes. More experienced peers and mentors, HR staff, deans, and others may be in a position to help leaders cope with specific situations because they have encountered them before. Some of the circumstances where leaders may benefit from situation-oriented coaching include:

- - Setting tone and expectations with faculty in the unit (e.g., civility, collegiality, respect).
 - Mediating demands from senior leaders and negotiating agreements with peers (e.g., the spousal hire, the joint appointment).
 - Managing conflicts with and between staff, students, and faculty.
 - Confronting poor performance or under-achievement.
 - Goal setting and planning, decision making, delegating authority, or creating a motivating environment within the unit.
 - Recruiting, retaining, and developing the faculty.
 - Managing the money and expanding the unit’s resources.
 - Long-term planning: addressing long-term issues of mission, vision, strategy, competition, stakeholder needs, unique contribution, sustainable funding, growth, etc.

3 Barriers to Coaching and 4 Strategies to Overcome Them

Mid-level academic leaders often lack access to both types of coaching—behavioral and situational—because of three main barriers. These are:

1. *Lack of resources.* Hiring outside coaches can be expensive—often \$200 per hour—and unit budgets are tight. If coaching is to be made generally available, then strategies for getting over the cost hurdle must be found.
2. *Lack of time.* Even if academic units had funds to spend on consulting, it is unlikely that mid-level faculty leaders would have much time or be willing to spend that time on coaching. Often leadership duties are themselves overwhelming and are on top of teaching and writing obligations. We need to find ways for coaching to become part of the pattern of academic life in small but steady doses.
3. *Lack of a tradition of asking for help.* The historical culture of the academic institution and the expectations for faculty promotion typically emphasize individual achievement. Some environments can even be characterized as “sink or swim.” This tradition does not serve leaders well when they

are hit with the shock of new and unfamiliar demands that are common in leadership positions. We need to find ways for coaching to become a regular part of the landscape of the institution, for it to be “good practice” rather than an admission of deficits or of a lack of “grit.”

These barriers can be overcome. We have seen four successful approaches to bringing mid-level faculty and administrative leaders into contact with helpful coaches, in a variety of settings. These strategies include:

1. Leveraging existing coaching assets on campus.
2. Adding coaching to existing leadership programs.
3. Developing new internal coaching capacity.
4. Setting aside or raising funds to pay for professional coaching assistance.

Below, I will describe each of these four strategies in more detail. I will list a series of actions that illustrate the strategy and provide links to exemplary programs.

Strategy 1: Leverage Existing Assets and Institutional Knowledge

An institution of higher education has many situational coaches who could help new leaders. Leveraging these existing resources minimizes the cost of coaching, helping mid-level leaders without increasing the budget.

Action: Link institutional helpers to new leaders in a formal program.

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), the Center for Faculty Excellence (CFE) set up a program by which the leaders of the administrative units (HR, Legal, Finance, IT, Diversity, Advancement, etc.) presented a “lunch and learn” for new leaders of faculty units (heads of departments, center and program directors, and associate deans). About 20 participants each year were nominated by their deans and invited to participate by the CFE. The cohort met about once a month during the academic year for one hour and 45 minutes, including lunch. Each administrator brought a team of staff members and presented using a PowerPoint, followed by discussion and Q&A. Evaluations showed that, in addition to learning a lot about the university, new faculty leaders got specific instructions about who to call when they had a problem or question, and this normalized asking for help. Some then followed up to get help with difficult challenges. [Read more about the program here.](#)

Action: Provide assistance to academic leaders using student teams with faculty supervision.

One business professor incorporated student-consulting projects into his MBA program course. These projects focused on developing strategic planning for units in for-profit enterprises, which paid a fee for the service. At a reduced rate, these student projects also helped academic units that were trying to solve a problem deemed significant by senior leaders. The student team provided major assistance to several very high profile units with good results. Similar programs could be developed in other areas to help academic leaders (e.g., marketing, PR, website development, financial management, etc.) [Read more about the program here.](#)

Action: Make sure new leaders know about the existence of a campus ombuds program.

Campus ombuds (a gender neutral version of “ombudsman”) programs provide highly confidential advisory services to administrators and faculty on campus, and they are often able to quietly head off major problems that could otherwise land the leader and the unit in the courts. Campuses should consider establishing this service or, if it already exists, publicize the program to new faculty leaders. At UNC-CH, new faculty leaders had the chance to meet and hear a presentation from the ombuds.

After that, several contacted the ombuds to discuss difficult situations in the confidential setting provided. ([Read more here.](#)) Ombuds often can provide both situational and behavioral coaching.

Action: Create peer coaching programs.

At least two research universities have established programs in which new chairs are invited to join a dinner discussion group that meets once a month. Funded by the College of Arts and Sciences at both institutions, the discussions of the group are completely confidential, and no deans or senior leaders attend. A seasoned past chair leads the program, and a professional facilitator is brought in to moderate. Their fees plus the meals are the program's only expenses. Reappointed chairs are part of the group each year, and this provides additional mentoring resources. In this way the College provides new chairs a safe setting to discuss their pressing challenges, generate creative options, and get encouragement to take needed action. Participants have consistently given positive evaluations over the ten years at both universities. [Read more about one of these peer coaching programs.](#)

Action: Build learning communities of faculty leaders.

By adapting the well-publicized faculty learning community model (Cox and Richlin, 1997) to the needs of new and continuing leaders, institutions could develop many varieties of leader support groups and peer coaching programs. This could include learning communities for center directors, associate deans, chairs, associate chairs and the like, or learning communities focused on specific topics—such as recruiting and retaining faculty, managing conflict, etc. [See examples of learning communities here.](#)

Strategy 2: Make Coaching an Important, Visible Part of Faculty Leadership Programs

More institutions of higher education are exploring the possibilities of establishing in-house leadership programs. Non-profit and for-profit groups that serve higher education as such AACU, Academic Impressions, POD, Magna, Wiley, and others sponsor workshops on this topic. Institutions that are planning to develop academic programs should not miss the opportunity to build in coaching as part of the program.

This solution addresses all three barriers listed above. Because coaching is built into the leadership program, it becomes part of the time commitment. It does not require leaders to ask for help since it is already part of the program. The coaching expense is absorbed into the cost of the leadership program, so it does not have to come from the mid-level leader's own budget.

Action: Build coaching into interactive learning groups that address leadership issues.

[The Academic Leadership Program at UNC-CH](#) was designed to foster a sense of group cohesion and included two off campus overnight retreats. At the end of the program, the group was invited to self-organize as a continuing support group and provide mutual coaching on leadership and career issues. Following the program, some groups have continued for over ten years on their own!

Action: Use a learning partners model as part of the leadership program.

In their survey of national programs to build leadership capacity, Gmelch and Buller (2105) talk about designs that build in “coaching partners” as part of the program. In these programs, participants meet as learning partners outside of the formal sessions to help each other with current administrative challenges.

Action: Bring in outside coaches as a component of the campus leadership program.

As part of the UNC-CH course developed to help faculty leaders create compelling strategic plans, we employed a presentation coach from the corporate sector to help participants refine their final “pitches.” These “pitches” were part of a multi-million dollar fund raising effort, so the \$5000 expense

to provide consultation to eight group members seemed very reasonable. Additionally, three separate organizations shared the costs (two faculty development units and the provost's office), so no one group bore the whole burden. English and Kramer (2017) recently reported a case in which coaching was successfully joined to an academic leadership program. Sanaghan and Weinstock (2015) also report how coaching was used as part of an organizational development program for a nursing school.

Action: Make leadership mentoring part of any coaching effort for emerging leaders.

Mentoring has been a component of various leadership programs in the corporate world and on campus as well. Participants who are accepted for a leadership program are assigned a volunteer mentor who is an established leader. They support the individual in training during the program and the ties that are formed can endure beyond the program as well. One medical school provides [a leadership program](#) whose goal is to help retain minority faculty members. As part of the yearlong cohort program, each participant is assigned a mentor who works with him or her through the year and beyond if the chemistry is right.

Strategy 3: Grow New Coaching Resources for the Campus

This strategy addresses the cost of coaching to the individual leader and the units they serve by sponsoring the coaching program through a central resource (e.g. the Provost's office) which presumably has greater access to funds and is better positioned to raise outside funds for coaching.

Action: Invest in building a cadre of faculty coaches on the campus.

I once had the opportunity to visit a large federal facility that employed 3000 people. They repaired airplanes owned by all parts of the government, and they had won many management awards. They created a program in which employees could apply to become coaches in process improvement. If they were accepted into the program, these employees could devote 10% of their time to helping other units improve. The organization set up [a program to train and supervise the internal coaches](#). The program received requests for help and then assigned coaches. Institutions of higher education might experiment with a variant of this model to help first-time mid-level leaders. Such a strategy would go hand-in-glove with the other approaches identified in this section.

Action: Send interested faculty leaders for coach training.

In recent years, many programs to train and certify coaches have sprung up, several of them sponsored by universities. An institution could create a list of "certified coaches" on campus that faculty leaders can go to. Since they come from the institution originally, these newly trained coaches may be able to adapt coaching techniques employed outside the academy to the academic and specific institutional culture, without additional support. However it would not be a bad idea to "debrief" coaches returning to campus from outside training to make sure they are adjusting what they have learned to both fit into and develop their institution's unique academic culture. (For two examples of many possible coach training programs, go to <http://www.ntl.org/?page=ltw> and <https://www.ccl.org/open-enrollment-programs/coaching-greater-effectiveness/>). In this way an up-front investment in training internal coaches can multiply internal resources and cut the cost of coaching in the long term.

Action: Utilize recently retired faculty leaders as coaches and mentors.

There are a number of very successful organizations in which retired executives donate their expertise to non-profit organizations. [SCORE is perhaps the most famous](#). Senior leaders could develop a similar program to serve the campus. To serve, faculty would not need to be retired from the campus, just from leadership. Such a program would address two types of needs: 1) that of past administrators to share lessons learned, and 2) that of new leaders for guidance and support.

Action: Create a fund that faculty leaders can use to hire a coach.

Many donors to higher-ed institutions who have been successful in business and finance understand the importance of effective leadership. They may also be familiar with the value of coaching in a business setting. An enterprising faculty developer working with an enterprising advancement professional could, with senior level support, establish a fund that mid-level leaders could apply to in order to help them find and pay for a coach. One thousand dollars would pay for several coaching sessions. One million dollars might endow a couple of hundred professional coaching sessions annually. This may sound at first like reaching for the moon, but, in fact, some universities are doing similar things. The College of Arts and Sciences at one public university [recently raised a total of \\$5 million](#) for endowed funds that allow department chairs to make small expenditures of their choosing in addition to their normal budgets. The \$100,000 annual revenues are distributed on a competitive basis based on chairs' proposals. Such funds could go for coaching when the need arose, or the institution could dedicate a fund of this type specifically to meeting coaching needs.

Strategy 4: Link Coaching and Leadership Mentoring to Succession Planning

Another path to connect faculty leaders to coaching resources is to make coaching and leadership mentoring part of succession planning. Succession planning, long a corporate approach to talent development, seems to also be gaining ground in the academy—at least at the higher levels. Once a person is identified as a potential academic leader, he or she could be invited into training and related activities to prepare them for academic leadership jobs. That training and preparation could include coaching to develop the interpersonal, conceptual, and leadership skills that are needed to perform effectively in significant academic leadership positions. ([Read more about this idea.](#))

Senior Leaders Need to Act Now to Close the Coaching Gap

I have described several strategies for addressing the “coaching gap” faced by mid-level academic leaders, but this gap cannot be closed without the active engagement of senior leaders. Mid-level staff may propose, initiate, and pilot programs, but senior leaders are critical in supporting, amplifying, and sustaining these efforts. If *they* do not see the need for leadership coaching, coaching is not likely to become a widespread practice on campus.

Senior leaders should identify faculty and staff who are interested in coaching, charge them to build programs, and then stay engaged and supportive. Senior leaders might assign the job of providing coaches to faculty leaders to one or more campus units (e.g., Centers of Teaching or Learning, Human Resources offices, the deans of the large schools, the Office of the Provost, or some combination of these). They could encourage chairs and deans to consider how to make these services available. They could sponsor a faculty learning community or a faculty task force on coaching services. Once a program idea is planned or even piloted, then senior leaders could help raise outside funds to expand these programs and positions. (As we have said, wealthy alumni understand the need for effective leadership and coaching.)

Huge amounts of funding are not required to start. A small program can provide assistance to dozens of leaders annually, especially if the institution adapts peer coaching models, leverages existing resources, and develops innovative strategies. Ideally, senior leaders will consider the needs of their campus, review the four strategies proposed in this article, and get started on the journey of developing more coaching resources for mid-level leaders on their campus.

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