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Voices About Choices: The Role of Female Networks in Affirming Life Choices in the Academy

Karrin Vasby Anderson
Colorado State University - Fort Collins

Sarah Bonewits Feldner
Marquette University, sarah.feldner@marquette.edu

Kelly C. McDorman
Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis

Jennifer B. Pierce
Indiana University - Bloomington

Claire Procopio
Baton Rouge Community College

See next page for additional authors

Authors

Karrin Vasby Anderson, Sarah Bonewits Feldner, Kelly C. McDorman, Jennifer B. Pierce, Claire Procopio, Kristina K. Horn Sheeler, and Helen Tate

Conversation and Commentary

Feminist scholars long have evinced an interest not only in explaining the world, but also in changing it for the better. In feminist scholarship these goals are not always separable, but sometimes advocacy needs its own place. This section of the journal is devoted to essays that do not take the form of traditional academic research articles. Short advocacy pieces or conversations about women's scholarship and advocacy will be published here.

Voices About Choices: The Role of Female Networks in Affirming Life Choices in the Academy

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This essay addresses the topic of women's professional development in the academy, noting the critical roles fulfilled by support networks. Research and personal narratives explore the diverse choices women make, the resistance they sometimes face, and the need to find validation for those choices. Recognizing the importance of women's achievement of tenure and publication, the authors also challenge the notion that those traditional measures of academic success are the only, or the best, way to assess women's professional development.

The Scene: Seven female communication graduate students gather in a modest apartment to share wine, cheese, chocolate, and ponder the Miss

Karrin Vasby Anderson is an assistant professor in the Department of Speech Communication at Colorado State University; Sarah L. Bonewits is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Marquette University; Kelly Carter McDorman is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Communication Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis; Jennifer Burek Pierce is an assistant professor at the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science; Claire Procopio is an assistant professor at Baton Rouge Community College; Kristina K. Horn Sheeler is an assistant professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis; and Helen Tate is an assistant professor and the department chair in the Department of Communication and Theatre at Columbia College.

America pageant. Their discussion quickly turns from gowns and gossip to departmental politics, dissertation writing, and job hunting.

Five Years Later: The same group of seven finds it impossible to gather anywhere other than cyberspace because their choices since graduate school have flung them in divergent directions: Ph.D. programs in prominent Midwestern universities, assistant dean in a community college in the South, a temporary faculty position at a Big Ten institution, professional positions outside the academy, part-time at a large urban university, and regular faculty positions at small, liberal arts colleges as well as large, public universities. Despite the separation brought on by geography, career paths, family choices, and even research interests, the "girls' night out club" (as they came to call themselves) refuses to let go of the bonds they formed during graduate school. Although friendship is the main payoff of this relationship, the women receive professional perks as well. Their diverse situations give them a wide range of insights, experiences, and contacts that have enabled them to help each other in job searches, publication efforts, and mentoring.

The contributors to this discussion are fortunate. This essay grew from a host of conversations that we, and many other groups of women in the academy, have had about issues female academic professionals face. We are concerned not just with "making it" in academia, but "making it" in life—leading a fulfilling life that attends to professional success, personal contentment, and connections with family and friends. The network we formed with each other has been an invaluable resource for support, insight, assistance, and advice as we finish our degrees, look for jobs, participate in conventions, publish, and pursue tenure and promotion. Specifically, this conversation considers how our network has provided each of us with instruction and support. Further, in "going public" with our conversation we hope that our reflections on what we have learned from our experiences will benefit other women in the academy.

Before we jump into our conversation, we would like to introduce ourselves. We are relatively new to our careers in academia, and we find ourselves sometimes challenging what we were taught in graduate school about "success" in the academy. While we share similar educational experiences, we have ended up at very different institutions and professional positions. We also have different family obligations. Some of us are married with children, some married with no children, and some of us are single. Our conversations about our chosen profession have served as a point of validation for difficult choices as we manage careers and family.

Even as we seek successful careers (defined in different ways for each of us), we find ourselves challenging what it means to be successful, and our conversations have told us that we are not alone in these thoughts.

To contribute to a wider conversation in which many of you may be participating, each of us completed research on advice for success and on the obstacles that academic women face in positions similar to our own. We also added our own voices to the research, sometimes challenging the ways women's choices are appraised. We hope that our conversation provides insight and ideas to others who face similar circumstances. To that end, this narrative combines research, personal stories, and practical tips for women pursuing personal and professional fulfillment. After providing an overview of the position of women in the academy, we discuss the importance of female support networks, with each of us speaking from our own circumstances. We conclude by reflecting on our experiences to suggest what we have learned and how others might benefit from similar exchanges.

Women in the Academy

Our conversations about our lives as academic women are inescapably intertwined with larger discussions and research about the status of women in higher education. We acknowledge two issues when assessing the position of women in the academy. Regardless of similar educational experiences, women are not a homogenous group sharing career goals or even definitions of career success. Women make diverse career choices for a host of reasons: personal aptitude and interests; opportunities presented or barriers faced as a result of ethnicity, social class, culture, or age; family circumstance; even the desire to live and work in a specific region. Second, when looking at studies that define academic success according to the number of women who secure tenure-track jobs, advance within the academy, and publish successfully, the results are mixed. Some studies report that women lag behind men in terms of professional advancement, and others note the tremendous progress women have made with advice on how they've "made it."

Despite the mixed nature of the results, this research frames a story familiar to many women in the academy. To begin, let's look at what the numbers tell us about women moving through doctoral programs. According to the 2001 Survey of Earned Doctorates conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, women are now earning nearly 50% of all

Ph.D.s granted[1] (Hoffer, Dugoni, Sanderson, Sederstrom, Welch, Guz-man-Barron, & Brown, 2002). When looking at the positions women hold in the academy, however, this same kind of balance has yet to be achieved. Considering tenure-eligible faculty, women are most represented at the assistant professor level and least represented at the rank of full professor[2] (Bellas, n.d.). Men are more likely than women to hold tenure-track jobs, while women are more likely to have jobs teaching at two year institutions (Bradburn & Sikora, 1998). Joan Williams (2000) explores this problem in her book, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It*. Williams corroborates the research statistics and finds women less likely than men to receive tenure and more likely to remain ABD, drop out of the Ph.D. program altogether, or work at teaching institutions rather than research universities.

While these numbers reflect the circumstances of women's lives, statistics like these typically are used to reinforce the traditional model of academic success that assumes that women who choose part-time employment or work at teaching institutions are somehow compromising their professional goals. We would not deny the advantages and the security of traditional academic achievement, such as rank and tenure; however, we advocate a more open-minded treatment of the career choices of women who opt not to pursue those conventional ends. To enact this understanding of academic success, women may require the collective support of other like-minded individuals. For us, the female support network that we established in graduate school has helped achieve this goal. In what follows, we share some of the threads of our conversation.

Importance of Female Support Networks

The research we have completed on support networks substantiates our own experiences: networking is an important tool for the aspiring female academic. Although we often think of "networking" as something that occurs at conventions and with people who are senior to us in the profession, a network of female colleagues is a vital source of information and support even to students just beginning their academic careers. We all "survived" (or are surviving) graduate school by supporting each other at every step of the process. Those of us further along readily gave advice and shared notes with our junior colleagues. Therefore, learning and even changing the rules of academic life has been a central theme of our conversations, and we focus on this challenge in the following personal narrative.

Perspective on "Learning the Rules" of the Academy

While I learned many things as I completed my Ph.D. at a research-intensive institution, perhaps the most significant was recognizing that in many ways life in the academy is about figuring out the rules of the game. Chandler (1996) suggests that for women sometimes it is more than just learning to play the game—it is about changing the way that the game is played. As my primary social support network, my "girlfriends" helped me to discover ways to re-shape the game and find a place for my voice in this game. They told me the rules that they encountered as they worked through committees, drafts, and other obstacles on their way to completing their dissertations.

One of these women told the story of a faculty member who was gleefully pointing out his harsh critique of an article that he "ripped to shreds." My friend asked him if it made him feel like more of a scholar to tear apart another's ideas. For me, this story was an avenue for talking about a shared frustration with this competitive view of the academy. Her response showed me an alternative to following traditional rules of academics. In other words, there are other ways of being in the academy, and women's networks validate these alternatives. While the rules of the game might suggest that work that is valuable fits within this mainstream view of competitive critique, this network helps me craft a space in which I can develop my work without getting caught up in this system. Over time, I have collaborated with these colleagues both on this project and others in ways that better fit what I hope to get out of my experience in the academy.

The support I find from my network extends beyond learning the academy's "rules" about academic research. Conversation within this network has also helped me as I seek to establish my identity as a professional woman in the academy. I came to graduate school wholly convinced that *it* was not about gender. I learned that while *it* is not all about gender, that gender inescapably shapes my experiences and the way I construct my story as an academic. Recognizing

the gendered nature of the academy is not new—what is unique is that my women friends have enabled me to frame these issues in useful ways. For example, while attending a department social event, I found myself in a conversation with a male colleague. At one point, he asked if I fantasized what it would be like to be with him and if I planned to go home with him or go home alone. In that moment, I remained silent, struggling to find the "right thing" to say. Through our conversations, my women friends both gave me a space in which I could process this event and helped me identify ways that I could reclaim a voice that challenged the masculine norms that drive such interactions. It was important for me to be heard and to hear a group of women tell their stories about offhand comments in seminars, faculty meetings, and in the hallway. From the flip response to the strategic to the resistant, I now have a repertoire of stories that help me to frame these events and to choose my response. I have now completed graduate school and have a position as a tenure-track faculty member and the network continues to help me learn the ropes. As I establish myself as a professional woman, these stories continue to assist me when making sense out of the "rules" of the academy and finding my place within it.

Clearly, women (and, yes, men) go through a learning process when finding their place in the academy. We have learned the importance of validating the voices of those who are learning and providing an atmosphere in which alternatives are entertained. If our experiences offer only one piece of advice, it is that there are no absolutes. No one correct way exists of interacting as an academic professional, nor is there one acceptable definition of academic success. Yet, the rules of the academy often suggest otherwise. As each of us completed our Ph.D.s at research-oriented programs, we were led to believe that the next step would be tenure-track research positions. The next thread of our conversation challenges this idea. One of us wrestles with that assumption and explains her choice to accept a temporary contract in lieu of a tenure-track position. This network of women was important in validating that choice.

Hunting for a Life, Not Just a Job

When work on this essay began, I firmly believed my voice in our conversation would be as a woman in a tenure-track research position acquired because of my drive as a feminist professional. I expected to lead my partner to that dream job. However, I realized that my ambitions weren't the only ones worthy of consideration. I am part of a two-career childless couple. My partner would never demand we move to support his career without consideration of mine, and similarly I won't demand a move of him. We've lived apart for career reasons and decided that was no longer an option. So, I took a non-tenure-track, yet academic teaching position, in which I found happiness for the moment. I selected this offering over other tenure-track possibilities and was not congratulated when I made the difficult choice, except, of course, by my support network. Let me explain my frustration with the ways women's choices are often assessed.

A recent opinion piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Wendy Williams (2001) articulates the resistance I faced when making my difficult job decision. Even though she laments the lack of mentoring necessary to prepare young women for academic careers and to nurture them through the tenure process, Williams erroneously assumes that male partners, such as my spouse, "derail" women's professional goals. While it may be true that, according to Williams, women are less likely than men to "compete for positions," thus reducing "their chances for career success, prestige, and financial security," her conclusion is problematic. Williams asks: "Why, in this era of greater equity for women, are we experiencing such a sorry state of affairs?" (Williams, 2001, p. 20).

My support network helped me realize that my choice is not evidence of a "sorry state of affairs." Young women like

me and those in my support network—women intelligent enough to study at one of the best graduate programs in the country—do not suddenly lose all of our intellectual capacity when making decisions that involve our partners and families. Williams's column gives no consideration to the idea that a woman's choices may indeed be the best for her and her family at a particular time. By taking a non-tenure-track teaching position, I have not settled, sold out, or given up on a traditional research-oriented position. I do, however, realize the increased difficulties my choice creates.

The logical assumption in articles such as Williams's is that if a woman invests the time, money, and effort to pursue a terminal degree, she should always take the next step and secure a tenure-track position. My choice not to do so may have to do with knowing all too well what is expected of women in the academy. Women in tenure-track positions often have additional unspoken responsibilities. Nancy E. Cantor, Provost at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, asserts, "it's important to remain aware that young female and minority faculty members face particular pressures-... [T]hey feel pressed to spend more time than male colleagues on tasks like acting as mentors to students—work that builds community but that also robs time from the scholarship necessary for a bright future of their own" (qtd. in Lively, 2000, p. A33). With more women entering top spots as provosts and university presidents, hopefully the challenges of the woman professional will become more visible and influence the institutional structure for the better. *Post-script*: While this essay was under review, I did indeed land a tenure-track position at a research university with a supportive chair and Dean in a location workable for my spouse and me. My chair realizes the unspoken responsibilities women often take on and encourages all faculty, women and men, to mentor, advise, and become excellent teachers alongside the traditional research and service expectations. While it may take a little more time, the academic woman who wants a traditional research position without sacrificing other life considerations can find it, with patience.

> I am thankful for my female colleagues who provided a
> valuable network of friends to guide and offer support during
> a complicated job search and career beginning.

A central theme of our conversation is that there are multiple ways of defining success. This perspective is important for all of us, including the trailing academic spouse. While ideally two partners compromise to balance career goals, we have realized that sometimes conditions are such that one partner's career will take precedence. When this happened in our network, our conversations often centered on feelings of separation from the academic world and the challenges of finding work. We strove to help our "trailing spouse" with these issues.

Finding Work as a Trailing Spouse

As the end of my doctoral program neared, two major changes took place in the life of the man I was dating: first, he was offered a new job in Washington, D.C., and second, he asked me to marry him. His job offer was too prestigious to turn down, so I began looking for a professional job in a region where I knew no one and hadn't planned to live. Thus, I became a trailing spouse. While more recent data on trailing spouses focuses on those making international moves, a broader 1995 article reports that "Of the 22 million people who packed up and moved for work last year, only 2 million were husbands trailing their wives" (Hendershott, 1995, p. 28). With Ph.D. and MLS in hand, I started a place-bound job search.

I began trailing spousehood confident that I could work in a professional, nonacademic position and at the same time continue to publish and present conference papers, thereby remaining qualified for a faculty position. Early on in my efforts to balance my aspirations of returning to academia with the reality of my full-time professional job, one member of this female network connected me with a book project to which I could contribute. My advisor, too, encouraged me to revise a course paper for a journal submission, but as the

demands of my day job grew, I found it difficult to write. So he offered a new project—a relatively prestigious one, that I would never have been offered alone—where he could offer more direction and support, and we co-authored that paper. This assistance in generating publications was essential to keeping my c.v. current.

While my female colleagues sent supportive messages from cyberspace, the intensely status-conscious environment of the nation's capital demanded a local network. The connections of men in my husband's professional circles helped me land classes as an adjunct faculty member and gave me opportunities to take on consulting projects. When I had begun to doubt the possibility of ever using my doctoral training, these men sold employers on the strength of my credentials.

I entertained my "girlfriends" with stories of my foray into libraries, law offices, and life on Capitol Hill while they encouraged resilience and ensured that I kept my eye on the path to faculty work. These women suggested research outlets and taught me to laugh at my fears of the demise of my academic career. They became a source of strength as I took advantage of traditional networks within my geographic confines.

Together, these networks ultimately helped me to land the job I had desired—a tenure-track position in a city where my husband also has significant professional opportunities. My experience shows that the place-bound job seeker benefits from thinking of her network as all supportive colleagues—male or female. In my case, my husband's colleagues were among those who facilitated career moves allowing me to remain professionally competitive for academic jobs, while this female network listened to my concerns and helped keep me in the academic loop. In my female network, I found women who not only understood my choices but encouraged me as I struggled to find success as a trailing spouse.

As the two previous stories reveal, family is a central theme of our conversations. We share the joys and fears, but most importantly we offer support for all the challenges that necessarily come with "family," regard-

less of its make-up. To carve out a niche in the academy that privileges family as well as work can be daunting. For one of us, this meant embracing part-time teaching.

Achieving the Benefits of Part-time Teaching

I come to this conversation as the part-timer of the group. I am married to an academic in the communication field who is in his fifth year of a tenure-track position. I have a stepdaughter who lives in the area and visits regularly, and we have no desire for major geographic relocation. For these reasons I came to part-time teaching. I continue to look for full-time employment in our area, but until that search is successful, I benefit from part-time teaching. By limiting my job search geographically, I am similar to other part-timers. As discussed earlier, women are more likely than men to find part-time positions (Sanderson, Dugoni, Hoffer, & Selfa, 1999). Moreover, two-thirds of the part-time women interviewed in one study said family obligations prevent them from relocating and therefore often keep them in part-time positions (Bottiani, 1994).

Part-time teaching was not the image I had of my career when I began my Ph.D. I was young, unattached, and motivated to take the fast track through the program and into a tenure-track job. My vision was the conventional model of academic success. Becoming involved in a serious relationship/marriage, and having a stepchild, forced me to reevaluate what my career path would be. I slowed down my academic progress, taking, for example, an extra year to complete courses and qualifying exams, in order to achieve a productive balance of my career and family life. As mentioned above, I've also geographically limited my job search. I am content and happy with the choices I have made.

However, achieving that happiness or even acceptance of my position was difficult. Part of the difficulty was in my own reluctance to let go of the conventional image of success in academia. I also felt pressure from some faculty members who didn't understand the choices I was making. I *knew* I

was making the right decisions, yet I still struggled with them. Acceptance took time, and more importantly valida-tion. This is the primary benefit of this female network for me. Each of the women in this group has made "alternative" choices or faced inequities in the traditional system, and therefore each was able to help me accept my position. This acceptance is significant.

I have found that attitude is a vital factor in acceptance, and the research supports this conclusion. Lundy and Warme (1990) found, "While gender does not significantly affect satisfaction with part-time teaching or with part-time status, being a voluntary or involuntary part-timer has a strong impact on both these variables" (n.p.). Wallace (1983) also indicates that the reasons for accepting/seeking part-time teaching can affect whether the limitations or the benefits of part-time work are emphasized. According to Wallace, some of the problems with part-time teaching include per-course salaries, lack of college-paid benefits such as health insur-ance, job insecurity, lack of recognition on campus, exclu-sion from faculty governance, and the lack of opportunities for professional recognition or growth. However, Wallace also notes benefits to part-time teaching such as keeping in touch with the classroom and maintaining some professional connections. Those who come to the position willingly are more likely to focus on the benefits over the limitations. Similarly, Lundy and Warme (1985) argue that reluctant part-timers see themselves at the very bottom of the univer-sity system, while for the willing part-timers the joys of teaching and staying connected outweigh the problems of little compensation or recognition.

Therefore, the positive attitude and acceptance this net-work helped me achieve have allowed me to be a willing part-timer. I am satisfied with my position and the benefits it brings me. I find the students at the urban university where I teach dynamic and engaging, and I've improved my teach-ing and advising abilities. I've had the benefit of strong leadership and positive mentors. Moreover, I maintain pro-fessional connections and disciplinary currency from my

> part-time position as well as through this network. As I have come to view it, teaching part-time until the right full-time position comes along is a win-win situation. In sum, while I may be representative of the statistics on women in part-time positions, I am *not* compromising—not in my career and not in my life.

As the preceding stories illustrate, women's career trajectories may differ from most men's for a variety of reasons. Yet, it is important for women's support networks to validate the choices that women make, if only to give women the drive to continue toward their goals, whether they are traditional goals or those that tend to be less-valued within the university hierarchy. Our network is a vital resource for all of us as we process, respond to, and work within academic environments.

Community colleges play a significant role in higher education, yet receive little attention in the hierarchy of academia. Our conversation continues by underscoring the importance of support networks for community college professionals when it comes to staying active in the field.

Maintaining Disciplinary Currency as a Community College Faculty Member

Writing in a recent *Community College Review*, Professor Christine Kelly-Kleese (2001) asserts, "To maintain a strong presence within higher education, the community college should consider itself a discourse community" (p. 58). Kelly-Kleese argues that only by participating in discussions of the larger academic society can the community college succeed "in moving its professionals into positions of legitimate power within the larger higher education discourse community" (p. 58). Female support networks of colleagues active in your professional field are one invaluable source of accomplishing this essential goal. In addition, community college faculty must offer their students as similar an academic experience as possible to what they would receive at four-year institutions. In many ways, CCs are set up to do this in an excellent way. Students at the freshman and sophomore

level at a CC receive their instruction from full-time professors committed to teaching rather than graduate students trying to finish course work or professors fighting to publish or perish. CC faculty members enjoy the luxury of relatively small class sizes. The biggest lecture classroom at my college holds 65 students with most classes seating between 20-25 students.

Where CCs are most in danger of shortchanging their students is in terms of what I call "disciplinary currency." Community college faculty members generally teach five courses a semester. Many of my colleagues opt to teach as many as seven. This commitment can leave precious little time for reading professional journals or dialoguing with other speech professors. Moreover, in a relatively small field like speech communication, there may be only one or two full-time professors, each with his or her specialty housed within a more general department. If community college professors are going to prepare their students adequately for junior and senior level work in communication, we need to stay aware of changing trends within the discipline. The best way I have found to do that is through networking with my female colleagues.

First, I find my female colleagues much more supportive of my decision to be at a community college in the first place. I chose to take a job at a community college despite finishing a doctorate from a top-five program in rhetoric and public address not because "I had to," but because I wanted to do so. My male colleagues seem more puzzled about my decision.

Second, I have found my network of female colleagues contributes immensely to the currency of my knowledge about the field. Recently published articles are often a source of our discussions. E-mails from CRTNET that relate to my area of interest are frequently picked up by my female colleagues and forwarded to me in case I missed them. The latest information on important activities by senior scholars in speech communication is occasionally discussed.

Third, my female colleagues have facilitated my continued professional activity. This paper was an idea that

emerged from an e-mail exchange with the six other authors, my female colleagues from graduate school. One of my colleagues encouraged me to work with her jointly to submit a chapter proposal for publication just recently. Another is suffering through a rewrite of a recent article with me. The simple acts of reminding each other of due dates for applications, bringing "Calls For Papers" to each other's attention, and offering words of encouragement can be very important to continued scholarly contribution of the busy CC professor.

While my female support network helps to make me a more successful teacher and scholar, I also think my role in the network helps to shine a light on the importance of community college faculty within the academy. Professors at universities sometimes need to be reminded that the freshman and sophomore level courses in our field are highly valued by beginning students and the employers who will one day receive our graduates.

As each of our stories attests, networks of colleagues are important, not only for emotional and career support, but also for the basic function of staying current in our field. More specifically, our network has provided assistance in helping to meet higher education's traditional measures of success by facilitating the sharing of ideas for research and publication outlets. This function is significant in light of the research quoted thus far and the picture presented of the status of women in the academy. Contrasting those studies that suggest women lack support to publish and attain tenure, other studies suggest that women, even those with significant family commitments, are succeeding professionally.[3] As we discovered, this success was not accomplished alone but through the connection that a network, and more specifically a mentor, offers. Our conversation continues with the following perspective.

The Importance of Mentors to Academic Success

As I began to do some preliminary research for this essay, I was sure of what I would find. The studies would show that while women have made substantial gains in higher educa-

tion, they still lag behind men, especially in the upper ech-
elons of the academy and at research institutions.[4] I also
expected to find a variety of reasons offered for why women
have not made more inroads at research institutions and in
administrative posts, chiefly their responsibilities as wives
and mothers. As a single woman with no children and a
research-one degree in hand, the world would be my oyster,
I thought. Imagine my surprise when I ran across a recent
study by Harriet Zuckerman, a senior vice-president at the
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and former sociologist at
Columbia University, which found that married women are
more productive than the unattached women working in their
departments[5] (qtd. in Schneider, 1998). Her research discov-
ered that female professors with as many as four children are
just as prolific as those who are childless. She also found that
the most prolific female academics are those married to other
academics, even if they do not publish together.[6] Interest-
ingly, it is not just because their husbands understand the
demands their wives face and are more willing to share
household responsibilities (though that was certainly a fac-
tor); in addition, an academic spouse can open doors for his
partner (Schneider, 1998). One unkind interpretation of this
research might suggest that women are still only able to gain
their status through men, although that would seriously di-
minish the import of the work these prolific women have
done.[7] Rather, I would suggest that mentoring by someone
"in the know" makes the difference. A senior scholar partner
may provide a built-in mentor, regardless of whether the two
publish together or separately. Yet, women report that they
have a harder time finding senior scholars to be mentors than
their male counterparts do (Schneider, 1998).

Reflecting on my position in light of this research, I
understand more than ever the importance of mentors for
success in the academy. I currently hold a tenure-track posi-
tion at a small private liberal arts college. The regular faculty
load at my college is 4/4 with a heavy service and advising
commitment and an expectation of scholarly research. I have
been given one course reduction per semester to serve as
department chair, a position I accepted in my fourth year at

the college. As a new chair and relatively new faculty member, I sometimes wonder if it is really possible to meet the daily demands, let alone find time for research. I have the advantage of a wonderful mentor in my previous department chair, who has offered advice and given me opportunities to grow as a professional, and these advantages have paid off in my short career. Where I lack mentoring is in research, which has proved a difficulty. Because my college is small, I am one of only two professionals in my field, and my colleague and I do very different kinds of research. This distinction provides good balance for a small department, but does not provide opportunities for much collaboration, let alone mentoring.

While I still struggle with getting my research out and under review, my network of "girlfriends" has provided some of the support I need. One of them offered to read a manuscript for me while she was out on maternity leave. Another sent me a list of guidelines on getting through the submission process. When faced with the decision of taking on administrative responsibilities, my network served as a sounding board for the wisdom of serving as an untenured chair, and all congratulated me on my decision and continue to serve as sounding boards and cheerleaders. Even though I struggle to find the time and energy to do research and feel daunted by my responsibilities, I have found that my friendships renew me, and I remember that my students need mentoring too.

As we have acknowledged previously, with women's responsibilities spread so thin, it may be difficult for more advanced women in the field to take on the additional duties of being a mentor. All of us graduated from Ph.D. departments dominated by men, some of whom spoke from their realms of experience as professionals with stay-at-home spouses. They were, perhaps understandably, less receptive to some of our choices than are women colleagues who have faced similar life experiences.

Although mentoring is often discussed as an important key to career success, time constraints and a lack of concrete mentoring strategies may impede the mentoring efforts of senior female academics. Our final voice in the conversation has benefited from excellent mentoring by senior scholars. She offers concrete ways that women in academia can mentor each other successfully.

The Mentoring Role within Female Support Networks

As a master's student I had the luxury of being mentored by a well-published scholar in our field. My thesis adviser performed "standard" mentoring duties such as helping me define a research project and improve my writing skills, connecting me with faculty at Ph.D. institutions, and providing valuable advice during the job-search process. However, the "informal" mentoring was, for me, more important and had longer-lasting impact. After I presented my thesis prospectus to the department, my adviser put a note in my mailbox. It was a short, friendly note congratulating me on completing my prospectus defense and commending me on my promise as a scholar in our discipline. It was the first time anyone had spoken to me as a "colleague" who might be able to contribute to the "discipline." I have saved that note and re-read it every time a paper gets rejected or the merit of a particular research project is questioned. That note has given me more than one mental boost over the years, and it demonstrates that the first step in successful mentoring is for established scholars to take the initiative to recognize the work of students and new scholars.

That fact was illustrated to me again when I attended my first National Communication Association convention. I was a doctoral candidate presenting a paper that employed the work of a prominent female scholar. After the panel concluded, a graduate student approached me and asked for a copy of my paper. She said that she worked with the scholar whose work I used and thought she would be interested in my paper. Flattered that anyone would be interested in my paper, I eagerly gave a copy to her, but expected nothing more to come of it. Two months later, a letter from that scholar arrived in the mail. She graciously commended me on the paper, noted its specific strengths, and suggested areas for revision and further research. Although my scholarship was years away from being of publishable quality, the unsolicited letter (like my adviser's note) made me feel like part of the academic community.

If the first step of effective mentoring is for senior scholars simply to encourage their junior colleagues in informal ways, the second step is for mentors and mentees to maximize networking possibilities at conferences and conventions. Again, early in my career I benefited from the generosity of my master's adviser. Most mentors are willing to introduce their students to other scholars at conventions, but my adviser recognized that attending conventions can be a costly and intimidating process for many graduate students. Not only did she counsel me on which conventions to attend (making me aware of specialty conferences like the Gender Conference), but she invited me to share a room with her and allowed me to tag along at meals and social times. I "networked" with senior scholars in the non-intimidating context of a shopping trip. She also encouraged me to take advantage of more formal networking opportunities such as serving as the student representative for the Feminist and Women's Studies Division of NCA and later serving as treasurer for the Organization for Research on Women and Communication.

The positive experiences I have had as a student and young scholar in this discipline illustrate how important it is for senior colleagues to initiate the mentoring process. This is a lot to ask since so many demands already are placed on the time of women faculty members. I am convinced, however, that as a graduate student I did not have the experience, exposure, or confidence to know what to ask of senior colleagues. That they stepped in to initiate that process of encouragement and mentoring made me feel part of a larger community of women scholars. It served as an antidote for the isolation experienced by so many women in the academy.

Now, I find myself in the position my mentor was in years ago—an active female scholar on the graduate faculty in a large department of speech communication. At this very moment, I am at the Conference on Presidential Rhetoric at Texas A&M University. I am sitting with one of the co-authors of this piece, putting the finishing touches on it. Earlier today, we had lunch with two former master's stu-

dents from my university and introduced them to the more senior scholars with whom we are acquainted. Many of those scholars are women, and as we discussed our current research we also passed around pictures of our kids. As the "girls' night out club" has matured, we've amassed an impressive set of credentials and experiences. There is diversity in terms of research interests, methodological background, institutional affiliation, teaching assignments, and service experience. We trade advice and syllabi; we room together and write together. We, and our students, have benefited from the budding of this "old girls' network."

Conclusion

Our brief "assessment" of women's positions in the academy suggests that women make different choices for different reasons, something that feminist scholars should explore and valorize. Second, when women do pursue job-search and publishing activities, professional networks offer significant advantages. We hope our stories have offered insight to other women about their own academic positions, support and validation for their choices, and helpful advice for defining career success personally. Our support network has played an important role in affirming the life and career choices we have made. As we have learned, young scholars are expected to perform in certain ways, but the rules can be changed—slowly, and this essay is one step in that direction, if only to validate wanting to change the rules.

Becoming friends during graduate school was the beginning of this network. However, becoming friends was no simple task. We have found that the atmosphere at many prominent Ph.D. programs inhibits the process of graduate students supporting one another. Academic competition, political battles among faculty, and the stresses and time pressures of graduate school may lead students to work in isolation. Each of us made a conscious choice during our shared tenure at a Big Ten graduate program to resist competition, ignore departmental conflict, and make time to get to know and support one another. The bond that was forged in graduate school has paid off immeasurably in terms of emotional support, and now we have a network of colleagues diverse in terms of research interests, locale, professional experience, and life choices. In the interim between

this project's conception and development to publication, some of us have moved into tenure-track positions at research intensive, doctoral-granting institutions. Others have accepted significant administrative roles. Two have given birth to new babies. The process of maturing personally and professionally has underscored, rather than diminished, the value of our support network and the myriad ways in which it benefits us.

Further, we are aware of the ways that being female creates significant extra-academic responsibilities, as we look at our female friends' children and examine our own family priorities. Each of us will make different decisions on this front, but one certainty remains: we share as much enthusiasm for the new mothers among us as for the authors of journal articles (although to date we've never gotten together to buy a gift for the newly published). Our electronic support group writes to share both baby pictures and article reprints.

Decisions about our commitments outside the academy reflect not only choices about families but choices about our strengths and desires within the academy. We have seen our academic strengths emerge into what will likely become more strongly differentiated career tracks. Some among us are recognized for their teaching, including one woman who achieved the distinction of being nominated in the same year for both of her college's highest teaching awards. Others are building strong publication records and maintaining a high profile at conferences and conventions. Two have co-authored a book currently under review. One has been named chair of her department. This short test of time indicates that our personal choices still have allowed professional strengths to develop.

Certainly female support networks benefit those who follow more traditional paths within the academy. Yet to contemplate non-traditional choices necessitates the support of women in the academy who may be more open to non-traditional experiences and who are willing to say "it doesn't have to be this way in order to achieve success" or "success doesn't have to look this way." This network underscores the validity of those choices and speaks to the *process* of building a career, mindful of the realities of family and the changing nature of career advancement in higher education. Women who have landed tenure-track positions still are faced with expectations about what the academy says counts in terms of career success. This network provides support in keeping those traditional avenues open as well, and underscores the responsibility that we all have in networking and mentoring young women so they can benefit from the challenges we have faced and learn from the choices that were so difficult

for us to make. Perhaps in the future those same choices will be seen as routine.

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Notes

[1]In 2000, the latest year surveyed, women received 44% of all doctorates, which reflects an increase over previous years. Specifically, in the social sciences and humanities, over 50% of all new doctorates are earned by women. These increased percentages reflect a continuation of a 30-year trend (Hoffer, et al., 2002).

[2]Women represent 46% of all assistant professors; but only 21% of all full professors (Bellas, n.d.).

[3]*Women in academe: Progress and prospects* (1998) reports that during the pre-tenure years, women may have children, heavier teaching, advising, or mentoring loads, or have other life responsibilities, while their male counterparts are actively publishing and reaching tenure. The study shows women's activity level increases significantly after reaching tenure, some even become more active than their male counterparts whose research and publication output tends to level off at the associate rank before increasing again later in their careers.

[4]A 1999 study by the American Association of University Professors did reveal that in just under 25 years, the percentage of women faculty members has increased from 22.5 % to 33.8 %. But many women are in the lower-level positions such as lecturers and instructors and only 18.7 % of full professors were women in 1997-1998 (Carroll & Franey, 1999).

[5]"Productive" here refers specifically to their output in terms of publishing.

[6]The same does not hold true for men married to female scholars. They are actually less prolific than their colleagues with non-academic wives (Schneider, 1998).

[7]And of course, male students and junior faculty have always relied on experienced mentors to build their careers without accusations that they unscrupulously networked their ways to the top.