



CHANGING TRAJECTORIES OF SENIOR FEMALE FACULTY THROUGH HORIZONTAL MENTORING

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ABSTRACT

Several barriers exist to female faculty's advancement and retention post-tenure including isolation in their departments, reduced productivity, and low job satisfaction (Ceci et al, 2014).

Utilizing an ADVANCE PAID grant, the University of Wisconsin (UW) System Women and Science Program is addressing these barriers through a horizontal mentoring program designed to decrease isolation and build networks for senior faculty women at the eleven primarily undergraduate institutions in the System.

This poster focuses on results from semi-structured interviews with 9 randomly selected participating women. These women were interviewed prior to their first year of the program and again following year three of the program. Themes were identified using an interpretive phenomenological approach.

Faculty reported reduced isolation, richer networks, increased productivity, and efforts towards advancement (e.g., applications for sabbaticals) as a result of participation in the program. Survey results from all participants in the program ($n = 37$) support the interview findings. Participating women noted tangible products as a result of mentoring (e.g., NSF grant applications) as well as indirect benefits such as advice for navigating difficult situations.



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Background

The horizontal mentoring program targets senior female faculty in STEM departments in the 11 UW primarily undergraduate institutions (PUIs) in the University of Wisconsin (UW) System. PUIs are large enough in size to employ a number of female faculty in STEM fields, but small enough that a significant concentration of women scientists are hard to find. Some PUIs employ only a single female full professor or a single female associate professor in STEM departments (UWO OIR, 2010). For these trailblazers in STEM, networks are shallow and support is inadequate. Networks are crucial for female faculty feeling connected to their field, accessing important information such as salary, and decreasing overall isolation (Hill, 2010; NRC, 2010).

Program Description

- **Recruitment:** 37 isolated senior female faculty in STEM fields were identified and contacted by UW Women & Science Program Staff during the fall 2011 (Fig 1).
- **Sample:** Twenty senior women have participated across the three years with 8 attending both meetings and 12 attending one of the two meetings.
 - ❖ 9 women also participated in 30-60 minute interviews with the researcher (8 at baseline, 7 of the 8 at year three, and an additional 1 interviewee at year three).
- **Program:** Disciplinary groups (e.g., Physics) and one Department Chair group were established. Groups met via email/video conference and at an annual meeting in central Wisconsin. Participants were encouraged to share information about their courses, research projects and other professional activities. All faculty also participated in COACH workshops at the annual meeting (e.g., "Effective Negotiating Techniques") and a book club.

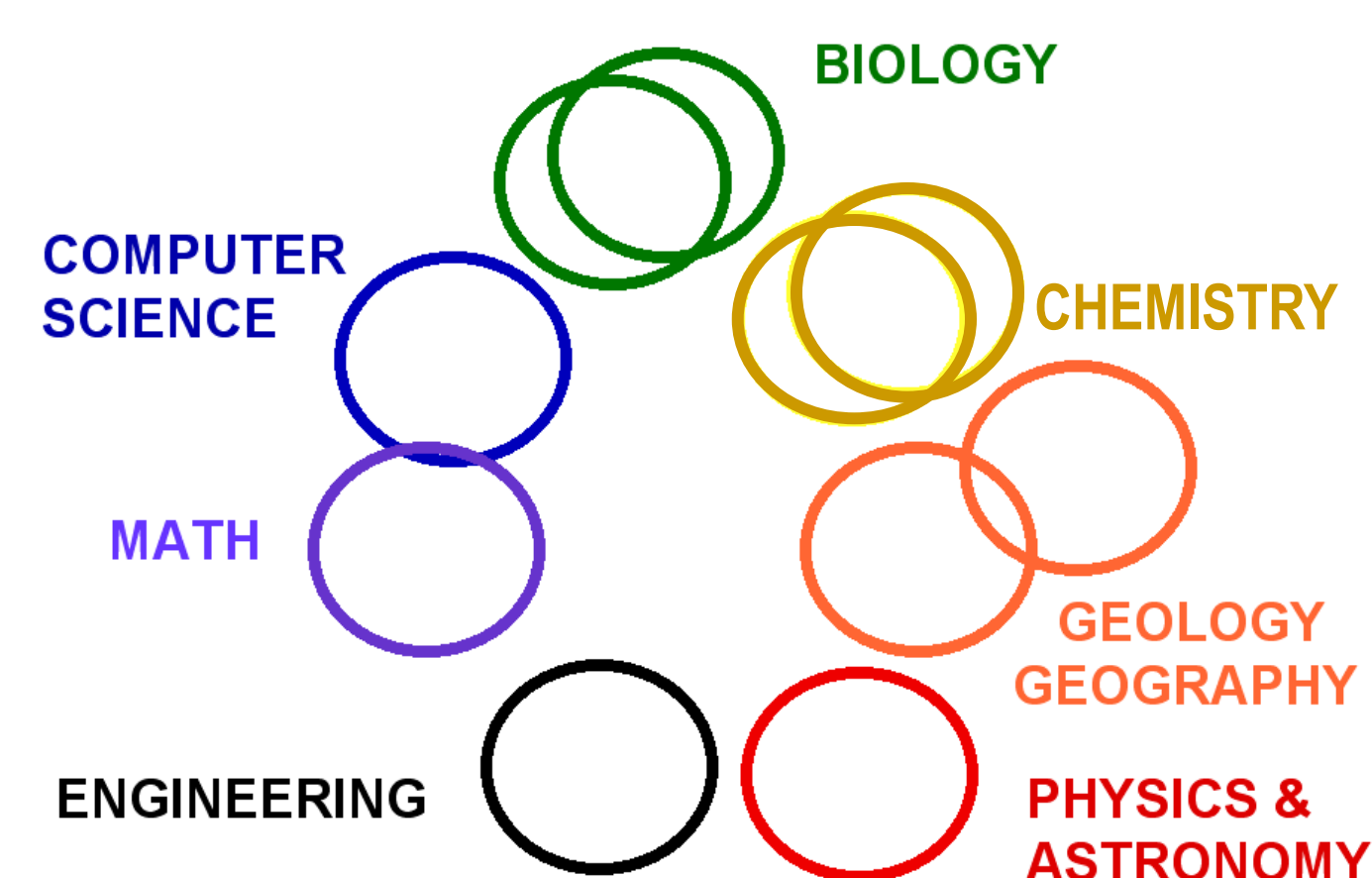


Figure 1: Disciplines represented in the Horizontal Mentoring Program

- **Evaluation:** Faculty filled out a preliminary survey at the beginning of the program and follow-up surveys each subsequent year (interviews at years 1, 3, & 5). Themes from the interviews were created using an interpretive phenomenological approach.

Pre-Program Results: Year 1

EXPLICIT SEXISM AND ISOLATION: Data from the pre-program survey and initial interviews suggest faculty struggled with **gender discrimination** and instances of **explicit and implicit sexism**.

One woman described experiences with sexism prior to being hired at her current academic institution:

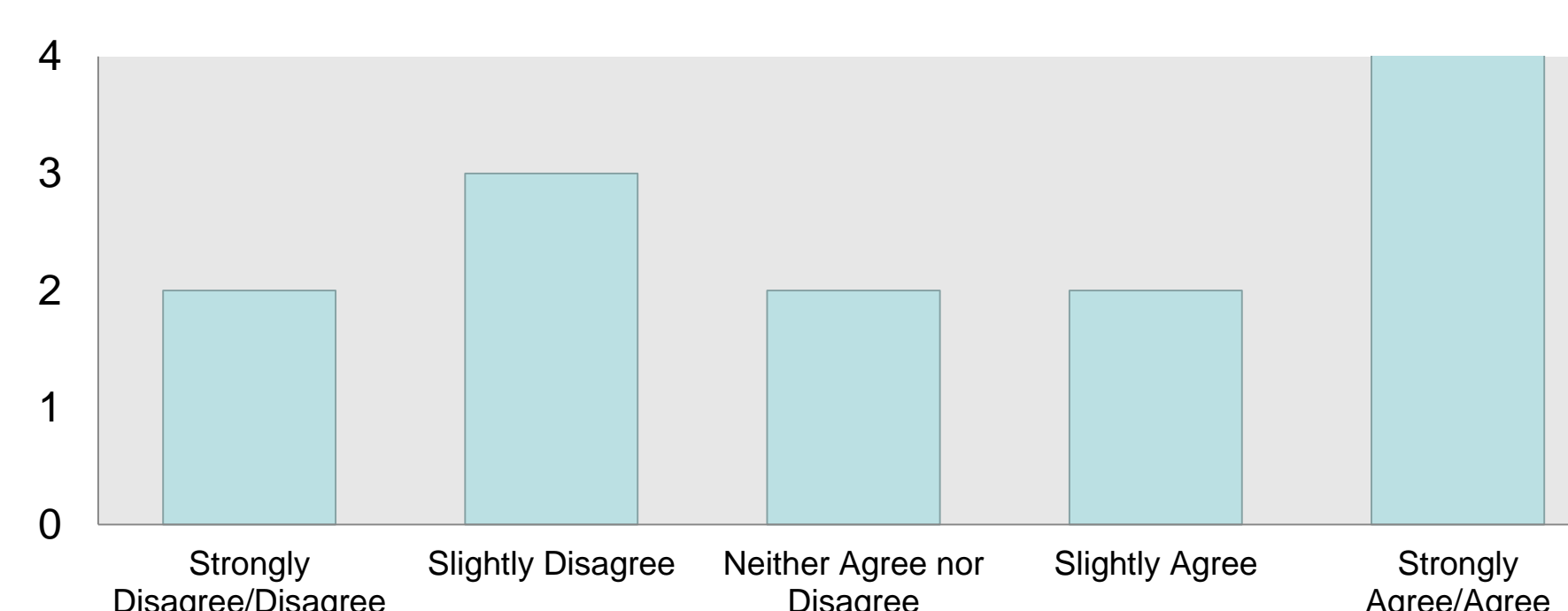
"...it was the only department that did not ask me any questions about my husband or if I was married. He's not applying for the job, I am."

Prior to the program, more than half of the women said they felt at least somewhat **isolated in their department** and many sought mentorship elsewhere.

"I am the only female in my department... I usually end up talking to women in other departments."

In addition, half indicated that they felt excluded from informal networks in their department (Fig 2).

Fig 2: "I feel excluded from an informal network in my department"



BURN OUT AND RESISTING BURN OUT: Female faculty were already attempting to address issues of burn out and mentorship in their departments prior to the program.

"By the time I had tenure, I felt burned out, and I don't have kids, so I can't imagine what it would be like in my department to be a woman with kids."

"We now have once a year, a women faculty and staff potluck and you can either bring a bottle of wine or a dish to pass and the place is jam packed and they walk in about 5 and [at] about 9:30, ... the last leave, and everybody kind of just gets to know one another and its really cool."

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Mid-Program Results: Year 3

OVERT AND COVERT SEXISM: Female faculty in STEM fields continue to report experiences of overt and covert sexism.

Colleagues are "doctors", but I'm "Mrs.":

"The other thing...I've recognized was that, ...you know the other professors are Doctor, you know, uh, Doctor so and so, but I'm Mrs. so and so."

Less room for error for female professors:

"I've noticed other things as well...that is guys you know, if they're not doing well, they're much more supported by other men in the department...poor performance is excused from other guys...[w]here it, it would not be for, for the women."

MENTORING GROUPS AS ISLANDS IN THE OCEAN: However, for many participants, their horizontal mentoring groups have become a place of support and resources.

"You're in this, you know, this ocean. And you know there's an island over there and it's that way"

"...and I think that that's really important, to get some of that feedback and to have people say, "Oh yeah, you know, that happened to me" or "That's horrible"...giving experiences that were really positive, too."

"And, every time we get together we just have a really nice time, we sort of mesh very nicely..."

In addition, some participants attributed **tangible outcomes** to their mentorship groups including submissions to conferences and applications for sabbatical and promotion.

General Conclusions

For senior female faculty, horizontal mentoring appears to be an effective method of reducing isolation and building networks. Participants highlighted the importance of normalizing barriers, celebrating breakthroughs, and creating collaborative deadlines with colleagues.

References

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