Writing Groups as Models for Peer Mentorship among Female Faculty in Political Science

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ABSTRACT Women are underrepresented among political science faculty and leave academic careers at far greater rates than their male colleagues. Women's lower research productivity is one reason for the declining number of women in advanced academic ranks. Mentoring can provide necessary advice and feedback to encourage scholarly production, but research shows that female scholars face challenges in traditional mentoring arrangements. We propose that peer mentoring can provide a missing link by supporting research productivity. Using a case study of an existing peer-mentoring group, we document how writing groups can provide flexible mechanisms for peer mentoring that circumvent the obstacles women face with mentoring and complement existing mentoring relationships. We discuss the structure of this group—as well as a survey-based assessment of it—to demonstrate how this approach can be readily adopted by other women in the profession who seek to expand their network of mentors to include peers in their subfield.

Political science faces issues with gender parity in its academic ranks and a "leaky pipeline," in which women are more likely than men to drop out of the profession during graduate school or between graduate school and their first academic job and to leave academia before earning tenure (Hancock, Baum, and Breuning 2013; Hesli, Lee, and Mitchell 2012). Although women have made significant inroads into the profession, they are still underrepresented in all ranks. As of 2010, women represented 28.6% of full-time faculty in political science, up from 10.3% in 1980. Women are best represented at the assistant professor rank (36%), whereas their presence declines at the associate rank (28%) and full professor rank (17%) (Sedowski and Britnall 2007). This disparity is not unique to the United States. In the United Kingdom, for instance, women comprise 34% of lecturers and senior research fellows but only 15% of professors (Bates, Jenkins, and Pflaeger 2012).

Research productivity is a key determinant of promotion and tenure at many institutions as well as a primary marker of professional achievement. However, even after controlling for factors including demographics, family and institutional characteristics, subfield, and available resources, women publish fewer books and articles than men in political science across all ranks (Mitchell, Lange, and Brus 2013). Problems with scholarly productivity stem from a number of factors: difficulty in balancing research with teaching and service responsibilities (Boice 2000), the absence of opportunities to receive substantive feedback on research (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008), and (especially for women and minorities) social isolation and a "chilly climate" (Anonymous and Anonymous 1999; APSA 2011). Departments often try to support faculty through traditional mentoring programs, which pair a junior and a senior scholar, but these programs do not always provide a good fit in terms of research and teaching interests. Evidence points to gender bias in conventional mentoring arrangements (Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2012), suggesting that relying only on traditional mentoring programs often may be insufficient, and alternative approaches are necessary to support female faculty and strengthen the pipeline for women in political science.

We argue that peer mentoring, which involves the "sharing of information or expertise from people of the same or similar rank" (Davis, Provost, and Clark 2012, 446) can fill some of the gaps that traditional mentoring leaves for female faculty and bolster the pipeline for women in the profession. We discuss writing groups as a mechanism for coordinating a network of peer mentors, which seeks to promote greater scholarly productivity both

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directly (e.g., accountability, goal setting, and discipline-specific feedback) and indirectly (e.g., social support and professional advice). The Gender and Political Psychology (GPP) Writing Group illustrates this approach. Although this group focuses largely on research productivity as a key metric for working toward tenure, it also provides support for service- and teaching-related issues. The approach can be tailored to emphasize teaching skills and service responsibilities for faculty at institutions that place less emphasis on scholarship. We describe the structure and membership of the group for those interested in replicating our approach. We also present assessment data to demonstrate the range of benefits that the group provides for female faculty members who are seeking to expand their networks of mentors and to advance in the profession.

'mentoring partners' in nonhierarchical, collaborative, and cross-cultural partnerships" (Sorcinelli and Yun 2009, 369). Peer-mentoring networks sidestep many of the issues with traditional mentoring (e.g., negative stereotypes, lack of female senior mentors, and homophily) by allowing female faculty to tap into a larger pool of peers at the junior and associate levels. As in the traditional model, peer mentoring also promotes greater scholarly productivity in a variety of ways, both directly—by facilitating accountability, goal setting, and discipline-specific feedback—and indirectly—by offering social support and professional advice (Bennion 2004).[1] For example, direct research support takes the form of weekly goals and comments on written work, whereas indirect support includes answering questions about how to supervise graduate research assistants or use a new tool in survey software.

We discuss writing groups as a mechanism for coordinating a network of peer mentors, which seeks to promote greater scholarly productivity both directly (e.g., accountability, goal setting, and discipline-specific feedback) and indirectly (e.g., social support and professional advice).

TRADITIONAL AND PEER MENTORING

The "traditional model" of mentoring is characterized by a top-down, one-on-one relationship between a senior and a junior faculty member. Traditional mentors provide many benefits, including socialization into the discipline and the transfer of institutional and disciplinary knowledge (Sorcinelli and Yun 2009). They also increase the chances of women staying in academia and being promoted to associate and full professor (Monroe et al. 2014). Because of these widely recognized benefits, the American Political Science Association (APSA) stresses the importance of mentoring to address pipeline issues for underrepresented groups in the profession, including women (APSA 2005; 2011).

Although many junior scholars have productive mentoring relationships, women and minorities often report challenges in establishing and maintaining them (Monforti and Michelson 2008). Traditional mentoring arrangements may not always work as well for women specifically because of gender dynamics. Mentors are drawn from the ranks of tenured faculty; given the wide gender gap that exists among tenured ranks, potential mentors tend to be disproportionately male. Experimental evidence suggests that male mentors may show a reluctance to mentor members of underrepresented groups (Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2012). This bias can stem from negative group stereotypes, including assumptions about female mentees' competence and lack of professional ambition (Rudman and Fairchild 2004) and "homophily," which is a tendency to show a preference for members of one's own group (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Ragins and McFarlin 1990). The paucity of tenured women in political science means that opportunities for same-sex mentoring are limited, which is unfortunate given research that found same-sex or "matched" mentoring is particularly effective for women in male-dominated fields (Blau et al. 2010). Collectively, this scholarship suggests that traditional mentoring programs alone may have limited success in shoring up the leaky pipeline for women in political science.

Given the problems noted with traditional mentoring, all scholars (but particularly women and those of color) should aim to supplement these relationships by developing "networks of

In terms of direct effects on productivity, peer mentoring can promote goal setting and accountability structures around research (Boice 2000). Accountability structures are systems that promote consistent effort toward a task. Teaching and service activities have better accountability structures than research because they are on a recurring schedule, with frequent deadlines, and they require face-to-face interaction. As a result, junior faculty often spend too much time on teaching and service and not enough on research (Boice 2000). Peer mentoring can also establish sub-disciplinary research networks across institutions. For example, Blau and colleagues (2010) found that female economics faculty members randomly assigned to an external research network with mentoring were more productive, received more grants, and were more likely to publish in top outlets as compared to a control group of similarly situated female faculty.

The indirect effects on productivity occur because peer mentoring creates an environment for faculty to informally discuss the challenges of research, service, and teaching with peers (Jacelon et al. 2003). It this way, it can mitigate problems such as the "chilly climate" and "imposter syndrome" (Dancy and Brown 2011; Monforti and Michelson 2008). Peer mentoring also aids in the formation of a successful scholarly identity. Faculty who establish a strong academic identity are more productive and receive more outside recognition in the field (Mullen and Forbes 2000). Peer-mentoring arrangements also tend to more readily accommodate nonacademic goals and to provide social support relative to traditional mentoring relationships, thereby facilitating a better balance of work and personal responsibilities (Bennion 2004). Given these advantages, peer networks benefit early-career scholars and supplement traditional mentoring relationships—particularly when they fall short for women and faculty of color.

Why, then, is peer mentoring not more common? Unlike traditional faculty-mentoring programs, peer-mentoring networks operate independently of institutions and are more likely to be self-initiated. We argue that greater awareness and use of peer mentoring may be particularly important for female faculty, who tend to "leak from the pipeline" without sufficient support for their research. Junior faculty members often have limited

exposure to the idea of peer mentoring but certainly stand to benefit from it. Thus, there is a critical need to provide examples of successful peer-mentoring arrangements to be used as templates for developing new networks.

We describe and evaluate the GPP writing group as a concrete model of this approach that can be readily adopted by interested faculty members. The structure we adopted for our writing group

group, especially seeing that "others are finding the time to do research," it puts writing on their calendars, and it "remind[s] you to prioritize research."

Although we recognize that our assessment data do not situate us to make causal claims, members vary in their extent of participation in the group. We use this variation to compare the attitudes and behaviors of more and less active participants.

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is based on Boice's (2000) research on academic "quick-starters," a group identified as faculty who adapt readily to the demands of the tenure track, prepare for teaching quickly and efficiently, and integrate writing and scholarship into their daily routine (Boice 2000; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008). Quick-starters tend to produce more written work than slow-starters, publish more frequently, develop a research pipeline more quickly, and earn tenure more readily. Research suggests that women and minorities are less likely to be quick-starters in their academic careers relative to men (Boice 2000). In essence, our writing group creates quick-starters of our members by using a structured peer network to promote productivity in both direct and indirect ways.

A CASE STUDY: THE GENDER AND POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY WRITING GROUP

The GPP writing group was created in May 2013, following the first New Research on Gender and Political Psychology Conference (Bos and Schneider 2012). At the time of the survey, the group had 28 members, 16 of whom participated routinely. Women comprised a significant majority (93%) of the group's members, 60% of whom were assistant professors and 40% associate professors. To evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the group's structure, we conducted an online survey of group members in March 2015; 16 members replied to the survey, which was not anonymous.

DIRECT SUPPORT FOR PRODUCTIVITY

Heightened Accountability

The group provides a heighted sense of external or public accountability around research productivity. The accountability function of the writing group is based on a body of literature that suggests that concrete, short-term accountability mechanisms lead to increased productivity for academic writers (Boice 2000). Studies of academic and nonacademic writing found that publically posting goals leads to a modest increase in productivity, with a magnified effect when individuals must report on progress toward their goals (Boice 2000; Lamott 2007). Group members posted their weekly writing goals on Mondays in a private Facebook group. Most members indicated on the survey that they "agree" or "strongly agree" that goal setting through the writing group "Keeps [them] on track" (table 1). Several members indicated that this process is the most useful element of the writing

The high-participation group (n = 8),[2] as compared to the low-participation group (n = 8), was significantly more likely to agree that the writing group kept them on track. This was the only significant difference between high and low participators on evaluations of the writing group.

Substantive Feedback

The opportunity for substantive feedback on one's research is a defining characteristic of the writing group. GPP members swap work weekly on Fridays. Although most of the swapped material is a portion of a research paper (typically less than eight pages), group members also swap other material, including grant proposals, op-eds, research reports, tenure narratives, job-market materials, and review essays. The most common swapping is of projects that are 50% to 75% complete, followed by full conference papers and papers that have a "revise and resubmit." The majority of members who responded to the survey agreed that the writing group provides good substantive feedback, regardless of the frequency of their participation (see table 1). One member cited "being able to swap with people who are experts in my sub-sub-sub area" as a primary benefit of the group. Research shows that peer mentoring (especially when peers are at other institutions) also establishes subdisciplinary research networks and that

Table 1
Writing Group Member Evaluations

In general, the writing group:	Overall Average Response	Low Participators	High Participators
Keeps me on track	4.4	4.0*	4.8
Provides good feedback	4.7	4.6	4.8
Venue to ask questions about research	4.8	4.8	4.9
Provides moral support	5	5	5
Has created a feeling of community for me	5	5	5
N	16	8	8

Notes: Responses from writing-group members were scaled from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). * = Statistically significant difference between high and low participators.

these networks relate positively to research productivity (Blau et al. 2010).

INDIRECT SUPPORT FOR PRODUCTIVITY

Professional Advice

The writing group also provides indirect support for research productivity. One way it accomplishes this is by providing safe avenues for asking sensitive questions. Many of our members have been assigned mentors in their department and continue to be mentored by advisors from graduate school. However, they are reluctant to ask traditional mentors "uncomfortable" questions that may make them appear uninformed or unprepared for their job. Our group provides an avenue for asking a question without being concerned that it may come up later in a tenure or promotion discussion or influence how a senior faculty member views their work. Discussions vary widely and include questions about what to do if you agree to review an entire book and it is terribly written (do you have to read all of it?), navigating a difficult Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, and publishing with undergraduate co-authors.

The group also offers advice and encouragement about self-promotion practices that increase professional visibility, such as blogging to promote research. The encouragement of the group (and feedback from group members) is particularly important, given that women are less likely to engage in self-promotion and they request recognition and advancement opportunities less frequently (Babcock and Laschever 2009). Group members also frequently cite each other's work in their own scholarship to amplify their professional visibility.

The writing group includes mechanisms to facilitate productivity both directly and indirectly and provides bi-directional benefits for peer mentors. Because scholarship is the primary determinant of promotion and tenure decisions, these peer-mentoring mechanisms are a way to shore up the leaky pipeline. They can help scholars overcome an absence of traditional mentors or a poor match with a university-assigned mentor and add value by complementing an effective traditional mentoring relationship. We encourage young scholars to be entrepreneurial about initiating and maintaining flexible mentoring arrangements that are tailored to the specific needs and goals of their position and institution. Moving beyond institutionalized mentoring programs to more informal peer arrangements can facilitate this in that they allow for greater flexibility in structure and focus. It is our hope that this study improves awareness of peer-mentoring strategies and facilitates other's efforts to implement them in their own career. We encourage mentors to share this article with their mentees to help them grow their fledgling professional networks.

A caveat to our arguments is that a systematic assessment of peer-mentoring programs is largely absent from the literature (but see Blau et al. 2010). The primary markers of research productivity required for tenure are found in our group, including writing books with university presses, publishing in top-ranked journals, and receiving grants. However, our assessment data are merely descriptive and, although members perceive the GPP writing group to have many benefits, we must acknowledge that those who participate regularly also were more likely to respond to the

The utility of the writing group for reducing isolation emerges clearly from the survey numbers: all participants strongly agreed that the group "provides moral support" and "has created a sense of community."

Moral Support

Academia is a lonely place—when researching and writing, faculty spend the majority of their time in isolation. This is especially true for women and minorities and among those who conduct research in small subfields and interdisciplinary areas (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008). Studies show that networks that provide expressive and social assistance in addition to direct support are particularly effective in promoting a positive scholarly identity among female faculty on the tenure track (Driscoll et al. 2009).

The utility of the writing group for reducing isolation emerges clearly from the survey numbers: all participants strongly agreed that the group "provides moral support" and "has created a sense of community." This is true even for those who do not regularly participate in weekly goal setting and writing swaps; our low participators are just as likely to feel that the writing group provides indirect support for research productivity by creating a positive culture and moral support (see table 1).

CONCLUSIONS

The GPP Writing Group provides a model for how a peer-mentoring network can support research productivity, particularly for women and other underrepresented groups in the profession.

assessment survey. Further research is needed to better evaluate the role that peer-mentoring programs can play in addressing pipeline issues in the profession.

In terms of broader professional support for peer-mentoring networks, one place to focus is specialized subtopic conferences. The GPP writing group developed from the New Research in Gender and Political Psychology Conference[3] and other specialized conferences including Visions in Methodology[4] have been associated with the development of strong professional networks (Barnes and Beaulieu 2017; see also Journeys in World Politics[5]). These networks can "act as professional levers that advance faculty careers" (Niehaus and O'Meara 2015, 160) and can have wide-ranging positive externalities on women's academic careers by facilitating the development of stable peer networks. Continued support for these conferences from key funding agencies like the National Science Foundation likely will go far in promoting diversity in the field.

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