

Finding FRIENDs: Creating a Community of Support for Early Career Academics

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Abstract

Starting on an academic journey can be a stressful and isolating experience. Although some universities have formal mentoring structures to facilitate this transition for new faculty, these structures do not always provide the variety of supports that may be needed to navigate the complexities of transitioning to the world of academia. As we (the authors of this paper) began our academic journeys, we found ourselves searching for support that was not available within our institutions. By drawing on previous connections and building new connections to peers at other universities, we created an informal peer mentoring structure that has continued to support us through the early years of our careers in academia. In this paper we share our stories of the challenges we faced as early career academics, discuss the ways this informal peer mentoring community provided support for us at the beginnings of our academic journeys, and offer advice for other early career academics seeking non-traditional forms of support along the academic career path.

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Introduction

Starting on an academic journey can be a stressful and isolating experience (Sorcinelli, 1992). Although some universities have formal mentoring structures to facilitate this transition for new faculty, these structures do not always provide the variety of supports that may be needed to navigate the complexities of transitioning to the world of academia (Greene, O'Connor, Good, Ledford, Peel, & Zhang, 2008). Formal mentoring structures often follow traditional frameworks for mentoring which primarily involve one-to-one hierarchical interactions. However, new models of mentoring are emerging that incorporate multiple mentors in which networks of relationships provide a range of mentoring functions that are often less hierarchical and unidirectional (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). As we (the authors of this paper) began our academic journeys, we found ourselves searching for support that was not available within our institutions. By drawing on previous connections and building new connections to peers at other universities, we created an informal peer mentoring structure that has continued to support us through the early years of our careers in academia. In this paper we share our stories of the challenges we faced as early career academics, discuss the ways this informal peer mentoring community provided support for us at the beginnings of our academic journeys, and offer advice for other early career academics seeking non-traditional forms of support along the academic career path.

Creation and Evolution of Our Peer Network

The FRiENDs, *Female Researchers in Education Networking and Dialogue*, group was born in 2008 when three of the current members decided to meet for a three-day “writing retreat.” The initial members had known each other through a state science teacher association prior to or during our doctoral studies. Although we were in slightly different positions at different institutions; one of us just finishing her first six months as a tenure-track assistant professor, one just finishing her second year of her tenure track position, and one finishing her first year in a non-tenure track position as a department chair, we were all struggling to find the time and support to move forward in the research and writing aspects of our careers. The writing retreat started out as a simple solution to this problem and has led to the creation of a peer mentoring community that has become much more.

Over the past eight years, our initial group of three science educators has expanded to a group of six early career female science and mathematics educators all working on different university campuses. In expanding the group, we decided to invite other women who were in the same disciplinary areas and close enough geographically to attend the summer writing retreat. In some cases, the new members were colleagues, and in other cases, only acquaintances that worked at nearby universities. We meet annually for a week-long retreat where we write; read each others' work; provide feedback; discuss our current ponderings regarding our research, teaching, and departmental issues; and share concerns and questions regarding the academic journey. After our first year, we also began to recognize the value that the writing retreat and the resulting peer-support community had for us and we began to record formally, our experiences and reflection on this, and share our learning through conference presentations and papers (Bottoms, Pegg, Adams, Wu, Smith Risser, & Kern, 2013). We hope by sharing some of our stories and the things we have learned through our experiences that other early career faculty will

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be reassured that they are not alone, that it is OK to seek out support, and that support can be found beyond the walls of their institutions.

Our Stories: Supporting our Development as Academics

During the first few years, this group provided a space to address many of the issues that we were dealing with as new education faculty. In our previous careers and in graduate school our work had a clear focus, identified deadlines, and expectations we understood. In our academic positions the diversity of our job duties increased, expectations and deadlines were less clear, and balancing our various duties successfully became challenging.

As I entered the academy, I believe I was mentored well by my graduate advisor. I was given opportunities to write and submit journal manuscripts and grant proposals. I knew or thought I knew what I needed to do to find success. As early career faculty, new to an institution and colleagues, unfamiliar with the ins and outs of the organization, I was tempted to join every project asked and say yes to every invitation. This tendency to be productive can be a distraction, confusing, and at times counter-productive. Collaboration and conversations with colleagues, such as FRiENDs, allowed me to discuss my options with a group of colleagues that were not vested in my participation in their projects or dependent on my contributions. The support and flexibility of FRiENDs provided a space to be productive and yet uncommitted.

Since we all had been K-12 teachers, we were all fairly comfortable with the teaching aspects of being a professor, but not as comfortable with or knowledgeable about the expectations for research, publishing, and grant funding. And yet, this was the area that was critically important for promotion and tenure and also the one for which there was the least formal support at our institutions. Through our participation in the FRiENDs group, we were able to share resources, learn from the knowledge that each of us brought from our specific areas, and provide support that allowed us to develop as researchers.

The following stories describe the experiences of three of the members of the group.

During my initial years as assistant professor, no formal mentoring was available in my college. Like many new faculty, I struggled with the publication process and with accepting and effectively using the feedback I received from reviewers. After hard work and submission of work I was proud of, it was demoralizing to receive critical reviews with many prompts for revision. Writing in collaboration with a member of the FRiENDs group helped me learn to value this process, to participate in it effectively, and to even enjoy the process (sort of). I now often wait days after receiving reviews on a paper before I read them. Doing so allows me to prepare mentally to receive them positively, even when they are critical, to dive into revisions with a constructive attitude, and to feel excitement in anticipation that the paper will be strengthened. While it never feels wonderful to receive criticism, I know that even strong papers are made stronger through peer review.

My university did not offer formal mentoring to new faculty. Although that created an obstacle to finding a mentor, my biggest obstacle was that I didn't have access to

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informal mentors either. I was the only mathematics education researcher on campus. We are a primarily undergraduate STEM institution with no education department. I did not have a local group of colleagues to collaborate with on large research projects or to help me to apply for grants. The support I needed simply wasn't available to me on my campus. The FRiENDs group has been able to supply me with access to resources I don't have at my own institution. I have written grants, papers, and conference proposals with members of the group. My participation in the group is what has made my work as a researcher possible.

When I first started, the biggest struggle that I had was building my research agenda in addition to teaching new courses, advising undergraduate/graduate students, and serving on several committees. For example, the first paper I submitted from my dissertation resulted in an "accept with major revisions" response. By then I was so "tired" of it and stretched so thin by all the other duties that I put the paper away for over half a year. During the FRiENDs retreat, I found out other members of our group had similar experiences with publishing their dissertations. Through the experience of sharing our frustrations and struggles, finally, I got the strength to read the critiques and revise the paper. Then a couple of our group members read my paper and the reviewers' comments and gave me feedback. By the end of the retreat I had re-submitted the paper, which was accepted later. Such a supportive informal peer mentoring environment was missing at my home institution and it played an important role in establishing my research agenda during the first few years of my career.

In addition to providing access to resources, collaborators, and support, our group also provides a "protected" space in which we can openly discuss a wide variety of concerns, challenges, choices, and possibilities. The location of group members at different university campuses provides an external perspective that is free of evaluative, competitive, or political motives.

In my first year as part of the FRiENDs group, I was very uncertain as to whether or not academia was the right path for me. I had not received strong mentoring during my Ph.D. study regarding how to publish and was therefore struggling with the transition to the research expectations of the job. The first paper I submitted had received some negative reviews and requested changes that I didn't know how to address. I didn't feel that I could share these questions and challenges with colleagues at my institution because I didn't want them to think less of me. During that first summer writing retreat I broke down and shared with the group everything I had been struggling with and my questions regarding whether or not continuing in academia was something I could do or even wanted to do anymore. After talking through it and getting specific help with the revisions to the paper I was able to move forward, the paper was eventually published, and I stayed in academia.

Membership in the FRiENDs group has also helped us to navigate issues of professional identity. As we discussed our journeys in academia, it became clear that the majority of us are not "typical" academics. Each of us is in some way (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender, career path) different from the traditional image of a professor.

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The following two stories from members of FRiENDs highlight the ways that participation in the group has helped us become confident as academic researchers and allowed us to see that there are others facing similar issues, that we are not alone.

Having entered my academic career through an atypical career path, I was initially reluctant to share my history with others as it lacked several traditional and key experiences. Conversations with FRiENDs helped me to see the value my atypical experiences bring to my career. My experiences with research and publication, bolstered by my peer mentors, have brought me knowledge and confidence and allow me to proudly see myself as an academic researcher and a teacher. These changes have been gradual, but were recently brought home to me when I was assigned an accomplished and well-known mentor who invited me to co-author a paper. When editing the paper I was surprised to find that there were many things I wanted to change. However, I trusted my mentor's judgment. We discussed ideas and changed only a few. Later when the reviewers made many of the same suggestions that I had made, my mentor asked me to rewrite the paper to address the feedback, another validating experience. I realized that through my informal mentoring experiences within the FRiENDs community, I had gained skills and experiences that prepared me to take the lead on these revisions with skill and with confidence. Through my interactions with members of the FRiENDs group, I have come to see myself as a strong researcher in my field and to value my unconventional path.

Eleven months after earning my doctorate, I became a non-tenure-track Department Chair in a College of Education. Although this position allowed me to foster my leadership skills and to successfully lead the College through national accreditation it did little to support my development as an educational researcher. Without FRiENDs I think I would have lost sight of my potential as a researcher. In our time together we shared stories about our experiences in our different roles. It was through these conversations that I heard about the development of their scholarship and increasingly wondered about my own. It was not only the constant support and encouragement that I received from FRiENDs that supported my transition into a tenure track position but their brutal honesty about the challenges they faced in their positions that moved me forward, I had a very clear sense of what I was entering into as I had heard and watched FRiENDs members move forward in their positions. Their struggles became learning experiences for me and provided a roadmap as well as constant support that I can't imagine I would have found anywhere else. I am the last member of the group to go up for tenure and promotion and feel that it is in no small part because of my relationship with FRiENDs that I am on this path.

Our interactions also supported the development of our academic identities as mentors. While each group member shared issues and concerns and received relevant ideas and support for these, each group member also provided ideas and support to others, sharing her experiences and expertise. Over time and through our interactions, each of us was informally mentored and served as a mentor to others. These interactions allowed each of us to grow in our understanding of the mentoring needs of early career faculty and learn to provide critical support.

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I believe that my experiences with FRiENDs have strongly influenced my current work with graduate students. In addition to mentoring them in the skills that they will need to be successful teachers and researchers I also mentor them in the often unspoken components of the job. I share my personal experiences and challenges including discussions about how I have dealt with negative reviews, how I have negotiated the expectations for promotion and tenure while keeping a balance in my personal life, and how I have sought support from colleagues, peers, family and FRiENDs. My experiences in the FRiENDs group have shown me how to be a mentor.

The nature of our group and the ways we interact have provided the balance that we sought between structure and flexibility, and between personal, professional, and emotional support. The annual retreat provides a consistency that we can all rely on while not requiring too much time away from work and family. Additionally, throughout the year various members regularly communicate by Skype, sometimes as often as once a week, to work on projects or just check in. We alter our pattern of work together to suit the needs of everyone in the group. Even the timing and location of the summer meeting sometimes changes in response to both professional and personal needs. Unlike more formal mentoring structures, our work together tends to be more fluid, with discussions often interweaving the personal and professional.

The following two stories highlight the various ways that the structure that we have created acknowledges the complexities of the lives of faculty and the needs of women.

At the first summer retreat I attended, I was still breastfeeding my youngest daughter. Periodically that weekend, I would have to excuse myself to pump breastmilk. Even after my daughter was weaned, my ability to travel to conferences and summer retreats was frequently limited by the fact that I was a mother to two small children. The group has been extraordinarily accepting of my commitment to my family. I do not have to make excuses or apologize for making my family a priority in my life. I give as much time and effort to the group as I can without having to feel guilty about not giving more.

The FRiENDs group is like a good friend at a distance, who has always been there and been supportive, yet still gives me the space and time if needed. When I had to live outside the United States for over half a year to take care of my father, FRiENDs members “stepped up” to fulfill my part of the work for the project that our group was working on and used Skype and emails to keep me in touch with the progress. When I came back to the states and was ready to participate in the project again, the group welcomed me and helped me to transition back into it. The flexible structure and deep understanding and trust in this community really reduced the stress and pressure of participation and commitment to the group’s work.

Our Advice for Early Career Academics

In sharing our story, we hope that others might see possibilities for creating similar structures to support their own development as new academics. The following are some suggestions for new academics and for those interested in creating support networks that extend beyond the walls of their own institution.

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(1) Realize that you don't have to do it alone. In our first few years in the academy a number of us in the group struggled with the tension between feeling like we had so much to learn and feeling that we were supposed to be the “expert.” We had accomplished our dissertation studies and completed our Ph.D.'s, so we sometimes felt that we should know what we were doing, and we shouldn't need help. The reality is that graduate school can never fully prepare candidates for a career in academia and seeking out support to grow professionally is helpful. Through our participation in the group, we were able to see that others were struggling with these issues and that it was OK to identify what we needed and seek it out.

(2) Identify a few key things that you need to move your academic career forward. Every person who enters academia brings different experiences and strengths, and no one model of mentoring will work for everyone since everyone's needs are different. Before seeking out particular forms of mentoring it is helpful to spend time identifying your particular needs. For some people the needs may focus on teaching, for others it may be research, grant writing, or better understanding the structures and politics within their institution. In addition to identifying the areas in which support is needed it is also important to identify the types of support that would be most useful. For example, do you need research collaborators, knowledge about publishing or grant writing, someone to provide motivation and accountability to accomplish writing goals, feedback on works in progress, or just someone to listen and provide moral support when needed? Note that what you identify will change, and you may not know exactly what you need initially.

(3) Identify the people or resources to support your professional needs. Identify which of these needs can be supported by resources within your university, college, or department, and which of these might be better supported by other sources. Although our focus in this paper has been on the support that we received from our participation in the FRiENDs group, each of us also accessed mentoring support that was available to us from our institutions, our previous supervisors, and current colleagues. In determining your own professional needs consider both formal and informal mentoring supports. For example, are there formal mentoring programs at your university? If there are, are they structured in a way that will support the needs that you have identified? Are there colleagues within or outside your university that you can approach informally to discuss ideas for teaching, research, or just to learn more about the workings of the department, university, or academia in general?

(4) Consider formalizing informal networks. Through our participation in the FRiENDs group we have learned the value of finding ways of formalizing the informal support network that we had created. By specifying that we would meet every summer, having specific goals for our work together, and making conscious decisions about the group composition, the network that we created became one that we came to rely on. The structure we created evolved out of our work together and was negotiated and renegotiated as time progressed. The structure we describe in this paper was developed to fit our needs. Other groups with different members and different goals may find other structures more suitable. In general, here are some things to consider when determining what structure will work for you: (1) plan a regular meeting time, (2) set goals, (3) identify a consistent mechanism for meeting (i.e. face-to-face or online), (4) make conscious decisions about the size and composition of the group, and (5) if members of the group will engage in research together then agreements regarding authorship and use of data should be

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discussed initially and renegotiated as work progresses. When structuring informal networks, it is also important to remain flexible in order to deal with unforeseen needs of those involved in the group.

Our involvement in the FRiENDs group has been critical to our development as academics. It has allowed us to access forms of support that were not available to us within the institutions we worked at. Through our involvement in the group, we have pushed each other to grow, provided an understanding ear when needed, and made the journey much more enjoyable. The greatest piece of advice that we can provide new faculty is, if you are not finding the support that you feel you need to develop professionally within your own institution, then seek out other forms of support. If the needed structures do not already exist, then create them. Building your own academic support structure takes time and effort, but the support it can provide is well worth it.

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