

Development and retention of women and other gender minorities in academia via a peer-led book club intervention

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Why: We were inspired by a comment from Dr. Marisa Bartolomei at a panel discussion on gender issues:

These issues aren't going to be solved by attending a panel discussion once a year. We need to be talking about this in small groups on a regular basis.

Who: Interested graduate students, post-docs, and research staff who identify as women or other gender minorities

Where: The Department of Genetics in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

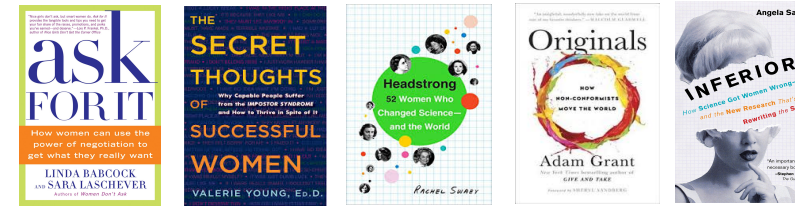
When: 2015 – current, meeting monthly

What: A peer-led book club and gender equity discussion group with a related annual workshop

Formation: Inspired by Dr. Bartolomei's comment and reports from faculty serving on search committees that they received very few applications from women, a group of post-docs met to brainstorm ideas for how we could address the issue. After settling on the peer-led book club format, we contacted the department chair, Dr. Dan Rader, to request permission to use the department email list. Reassured that there were no specific concerns regarding how women trainees were treated within the department, Dr. Rader gave his full support and offered to fund refreshments for the meetings, as a part of the department's commitment to increasing diversity.

Goals: To provide women and other gender minority scientists with increased confidence and improved tools to apply for and succeed in leadership positions in the sciences, with an emphasis on tenure-track positions in academia.

Books: One title per year is selected via ranked voting by the group from nominations. Past selections have included



Images from amazon.com

Format: Based on a survey, members are assigned to a group of ten or fewer members that fits their schedule. Each group has a peer facilitator who leads meetings, sends reminder emails and works with the department administrator to book rooms and order food. Introductions and team building questions are included at the beginning of the year to help members get comfortable with each other. The first half hour is spent discussing issues relating to gender in the news or in the members' work, educational, or personal lives. The second half hour is spent discussing 1-2 chapters from the chosen book. The format could also work with relevant articles or TED talks to serve as a jumping off point for discussion.

Workshops: At the end of the year, a workshop is held for all group members on a topic of interest. We have drawn from the extensive scholarship on the Penn campus including:

- Negotiation theory with Dr. Sara Light
- Impostor syndrome with Basima Tewfik
- Ph.D. career options with Dr. Vania Cao
- Conflict resolution with Restorative Practices @Penn

We also host junior and senior female faculty guests semi-annually to tell the combined group about their career paths.

Results: Of the fourteen members who have “graduated” from the group, all have left for positions that keep them in the scientific “pipeline”, including four tenure-track professors. Based on an anonymous survey of 52 respondents over four years, the group is succeeding in its goals of increasing confidence in members (80% agree) and helping them solve problems in their professional life (75% agree). 98% would recommend the group to others. The group also provides an improved sense of community for its members (94% agree). We also noted that the group seemed particularly helpful for foreign-born scientists, who may come from countries where gender roles are even more entrenched than in the U.S.

Anonymous Participant Feedback:

“It was great to be with other female scientists at a similar stage.”

“It's easier to speak up in front of a small group.”

“Meeting consistently helped create a sense of community.”

“It helped me find community in a department I was new to.

Interacting with other postdocs regularly is very helpful, considering I'm in a small lab.”

“Helped me meet more people in the department and talk about common problems facing us. Helped me realize that I am not alone with respect to certain challenges in academia.”

“It's very helpful to hear that other people share my experiences.”

“It was cathartic to talk about issues surrounding being a woman in science that I've been worried about in a general sense, but haven't had a reason to discuss otherwise.”

“The group let me talk about some issues I had in the lab and get general advice about post-doc selection that I don't think I would have gained elsewhere.”

“The group really helped me practically in learning about fellowship applications, the post doc/faculty application process, and generally how others feel in the department regarding issues of gender equity.”