Enhancing Mentoring and Networking of Junior Academic Women: what, why, and how?

Kathleen M. Quinlan [a]

[a] Australian National University
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Enhancing Mentoring and Networking of Junior Academic Women: what, why, and how?

KATHLEEN M. QUINLAN, *Australian National University*

ABSTRACT *There is a variety of career-supportive relationships that provide career guidance and psycho-social support vital to career success. Each person's network contains a range of different types of relationships and contacts that serve different purposes. This paper clarifies some of these different types of relationships, the benefits each offers, and what they have to offer academic women. Formal mentoring, networking and peer support programmes are presented and discussed.*

Introduction

Many universities are faced with the problem of supporting academic women. Mentoring schemes are often proposed to improve the retention of academic women. However, mentoring relationships are just one form of career supportive relationship. This paper discusses some of the pros and cons of various types of career supportive relationships that make up academic women's webs of intellectual, social, personal and political ties. Several strategies rooted in each of these models are presented, based on a review of current practice.

Mentoring Concepts and Issues

What is a Mentor?

Mentors contribute to six key areas of proteges' knowledge based on the dimensions that the career development theorist Levinson *et al.* (1978) defines as critical for managerial advancement: '(1) the politics of the organisation, (2) the politics, norms, standards, values, ideology and history of the organisation, (3) the skills and competencies necessary for succession to the next immediate step, (4) paths to advancement and blind alleys, (5) the acceptable methods for gaining visibility in the organisation and (6) the characteristic stumbling blocks in the organisation and the personal failure patterns' (Limerick & Heywood, 1992). Proteges can also become legitimated through the 'reflected power' of established members of their profession (Speizer, 1981). Along with these career-

enhancing functions, mentors may provide psychosocial support by offering encouragement, counselling, confirmation and friendship that may help young colleagues in developing a sense of professional identity and greater self confidence (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

In addition to the benefits for proteges, mentoring provides a way of passing on and preserving the traditions and norms of the organisation, ensuring that new members contribute productively. Mentors gain the satisfaction of sharing their wisdom and having their advice sought. Their reputation may also be enhanced by having a hand in the development of younger colleagues.

Limitations of Mentoring for Women in the Current Academic Context

Given that most senior academics are male, men have traditionally had more access to influential mentors who could shape their careers than women. Mentors are more likely to identify with and take under wing young people who are similar to themselves. Potential mentors may also perceive greater returns on investments made in men than in women. Sexual politics can also impede the development of productive male–female mentoring relationships.

Women often have different needs and concerns from their male counterparts, that need to be addressed in successful mentoring relationships. Women typically face a complex, interrelated set of career issues that may be outside men's experience. Some of these pertain to differences in career paths, time away from academia (resulting in gaps in their CVs) and other factors that affect the way in which merit might be judged. Academic women also experience greater isolation, higher levels of stress, a lower sense of self-efficacy and self confidence (Vasil, 1996), more difficulty in establishing relationships with colleagues, a feeling of being an 'outsider' (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988) in masculine cultures, inequitable reviews of their scholarly work and differential workloads (citations in Johnsrud & Wunsch, 1994; Burton, 1997). Women at all levels may also need to be more actively 'sold' and legitimated within an organisation (Burke & McKeen, 1990). These differences may make it difficult for senior men to understand and provide the support required for women to advance in their careers.

One can conclude, then, that if mentoring relationships are left to individuals to voluntarily and informally create, women will have fewer mentoring opportunities available to them than their male counterparts. Mentoring relationships that do develop and that provide the same benefits as those with male proteges still may not adequately address all the unique circumstances of junior academic women.

In recognition of the difficulties with cross-gender mentoring, some formal mentoring schemes focus on women mentoring women. However, those schemes tend to put additional burdens on the handful of already over-committed senior women available. Furthermore, even academic women who have made it farther up the career ladder need access to gatekeepers in the profession—established scholars who can serve as respected referees or serve on grant committees, selection committees, promotion and tenure committees and journal editors. These gatekeepers are generally within one's own discipline and spread across the world, as Maack and Passet's (1993) constellation of relationships illustrates. Women, in particular, may have a difficult time accessing these influential members of the discipline.

The traditional description of mentoring offered is based on models of traditional male career development (Erickson, 1968, 1978; Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Schein, 1985). In these developmental psychological models, males' careers progress linearly along a single

career trajectory, starting as a young, recent graduate and moving to a peak or a plateau. Traditionally, men's careers have not been disrupted by marriage or children. Mentorship has carried the implicit assumption that the mentor is older and more mature than the protege, along with being more experienced in the organisation. That model, however, has not traditionally matched women's development or career patterns. Currently, though, the traditional career development model is increasingly inappropriate for both men and women as more professionals pursue several different careers during their working lives (Handy, 1995). Insofar as mentoring depends on hierarchical relationships, an increase in career changers bringing experience in different settings makes the concept more difficult to put in practice. If this trend continues, the traditional notions of mentoring will need to be adapted to embrace a different type of relationship.

Beyond Mentoring to Collegial Models: networking and peer relationships

What Other Types of Career-supportive Relationships are Available?

Mentoring focuses attention on one-to-one, hierarchically based relationships. Yet individuals—particularly women who do not have access to mentors—rely on and actively seek out a wide range of career-supportive relationships–for instrumental or career-related functions and expressive or psycho-social support. A wide network of 'weak ties' can be more effective than an over-emphasis on one or two 'strong ties'.

Kram and Isabella (1985) studied peer relationships within organisations to better understand the purposes, functions and distinctive kinds of peer relationships. They found a continuum of career-supportive peer relationships, which they categorised into three main types. 'Information peers' primarily share information about their work and organisation. These relationships are common and each individual may have many of these types of infrequent contacts. There is likely to be little personal self-disclosure and minimal emotional support. 'Collegial peers' also share information, but are also likely to have moderate levels of trust and self-disclosure so that they are able to receive greater emotional support and feedback and discuss more personal work and family concerns. Given the increasing involvement and commitment of collegial relationships, most people experience fewer (2–4) of these acquaintances. 'Special peers' are a rare type of relationship characterised by high levels of trust, self-disclosure and 'sharing of ambivalences and personal dilemmas in work and family realms' (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 121). Such relationships usually take several years to develop and have a stability and continuity over many years, through changes and transitions.

Most of the literature on both mentoring and networking, including Kram's work, is borrowed from corporate settings. Maack and Passet (1993), though, have conceptualised a range of relationships in an academic setting. An important difference, they argue, between corporate and academic settings, is that in academia there are many critical relationships with people who are outside the daily work environment. In particular, academics often identify first with their important national and international disciplinary networks, rather than with their university. Thus, key local contacts are largely within the same department. Female library and information science academics in the US rarely mentioned mentors on the same campus in different departments or schools (Maack & Passet, 1993).

Maack and Passet's constellation of career-supportive relationships in academia (reproduced in Fig. 1) shows seven sectors of relationships arrayed across four geographic tiers. Those relationships closer to the centre of the circle are local contacts who share
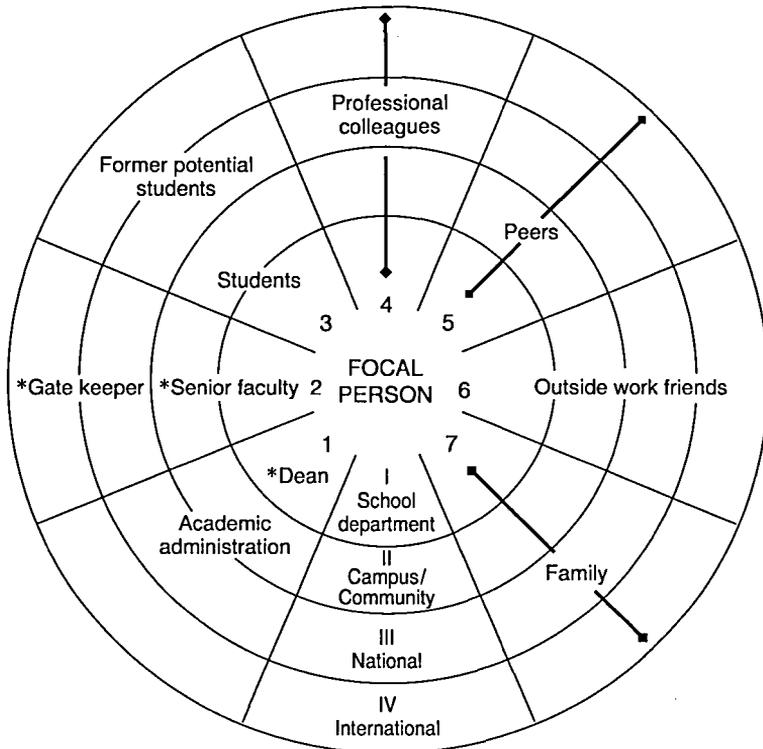
FIG. 1. Relationship constellation in academia.

Source: Reprinted from Maack & Passet, 1993, p. 125.

'Note: Hierarchical or quasi-hierarchical relationships that lend themselves to mentoring relationships have been designated with an asterisk; however, mentoring relationship can occur in other places. The sectors are arrayed in a clockwork order going from the more authority-laden or business-like relationships to those that are characterised by friendship, informality, and intimacy' (Maack & Passet, 1993, pp. 124–125).

the same department or school. The second tier depicts relationships with people who work in other parts of the campus or community. Tier three refers to relationships with individuals who live or work in other parts of the country while tier four represents international contacts. Some relationships are hierarchical, such as those in sector 1 with deans and other higher academic administration, or those with students in sector 3. Relationships depicted in sector 2 with senior academics within and outside the institution may be quasi-hierarchical.

Benefits of Peer Relationships to Participants

The networking literature, based on social network theory, focuses on the use of networks for attaining power within an organisation (Brass, 1992). Generally a wider, more diverse network made up of more 'weak ties' is an advantage over a narrow range of contacts. Wider ranges put individuals in touch with more different people, from whom one will have access to a yet wider pool of referrals and sources of information.

Kram's summary of the benefits and functions of peer relationships in comparison to the benefits of mentoring relationships is reproduced in Fig. 2.

Peer or collegial relationships offer opportunities for wider ranges of information

Mentoring Relationships	Peer Relationships
Career-Enhancing Functions	*Career-Enhancing Functions*
• sponsorship	• information sharing
• coaching	• career strategising
• exposure and visibility	• job-related feedback
• protection	
• challenging work assignments	
Psychosocial Functions	*Psychosocial Functions*
• acceptance and confirmation	• confirmation
• counselling	• emotional support
• role modelling	• personal feedback
• friendship	• friendship
Special Attribute	*Special Attribute*
• complementarity	• mutuality

FIG. 2. Developmental functions—comparison of mentoring and peer relationships.

Source: Reprinted from Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 117.

exchange, career-strategising, job-related feedback, confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship (Kram & Isabella, 1985). To Kram's list we might add intellectual stimulation (Boice, 1992). Robert Boice's (1992) study of new academic staff at two US universities reveals that one of the biggest challenges campus newcomers face is overcoming feelings of loneliness, isolation and lack of collegiality. Thus, the benefits that might accrue from peer relationships should not be overlooked in an academic context.

Peer relationships also recognise the contribution that each member brings to the relationships. It is based on a mutuality (Kram & Isabella, 1985) which can build self-confidence among participants. Even junior members of an organisation have experience, information, skills, knowledge and perspectives which will be helpful to peers. Gaining the acceptance of peers has the potential to enhance one's self confidence in ways that being a protege does not.

Academic Women and Networking

Peers, unlike mentors, are not generally able to offer sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, protection, or challenging work assignments (Kram & Isabella, 1985), all of which are important features of mentoring relationships for academic women (Maack & Passet, 1993). Relationships with powerful people such as highly respected scholars, members of grant committees, editors of journals or one's department head or dean make for a more influential network.

Studies in the literature on job-related networks in non-academic settings (such as a social services agency, a newspaper publishing firm, an advertising firm) find that women's professional networks differ from men's professional networks (Miller *et al.*, 1981; Brass, 1985; Campbell, 1988; Ibarra, 1992). Specifically, the literature indicates that women and minorities have limited access to or are excluded from critical organisational networks (Ibarra, 1993).

For academics, as we see in Maack and Passet's (1993) conceptualisation, these critical

networks are national and international. Nonetheless, homophilous tendencies—the tendency to choose people who are similar in appearance, social background and experiences—can disadvantage academic women in making contacts with important others.

Furthermore, for men, homophilous ties—those with other men—are likely to serve both expressive and instrumental purposes. Men can interact with other men in ways that are both career enhancing and which are psychosocially supportive. Women's homophilous ties—those with other women—may be chosen to serve primarily expressive functions, while ties with men may be for instrumental purposes (Ibarra, 1992). Male-dominated workplaces may also make women's ties with other women, who may offer vital psychosocial support, difficult to achieve since there are few other women in the immediate workplace.

However, in the context of structural constraints on women's network development and the availability of mentors, women will actively seek out satisfying, career supportive relationships, often with other women (Ibarra, 1992, 1993; Limerick & Heywood, 1992) or with family (Moore, 1990; Limerick & Heywood, 1992). Women's peer relationships with other women play an important role in providing the emotional, psychological and social support that is so vital to survival in male-dominated workplaces.

Formal University Mentoring Schemes

Several universities have instituted formal mentoring schemes. Some schemes are geared specifically toward providing mentoring for women. These programmes are premised on the mentoring concepts and theories discussed above and on the idea that it requires active intervention and formal matching to ensure that women have access to mentors.

University-wide Women's Mentoring Scheme

The University of Queensland Office of Gender Equity coordinates a scheme that has been adapted from a programme at the University of Hawaii. Through the programme, junior university women (the programme serves both academic and general staff) are matched with more senior women to receive assistance in achieving short term goals or completing a specific project as set forth in a mutually negotiated and agreed upon contract. The pairs work together over the course of a year. Training and orientation are provided to mentors and proteges in the idea of mentoring, potential benefits to both parties, responsibilities of both the mentor and the protege, feedback from previous participants, suggestions for building the mentoring partnership, troubleshooting strategies if the relationship runs into difficulties, development of an agreement between mentor and protege, and topics for future mentoring meetings. The coordinator provides the orientation and training session for mentors and proteges and follows up with the pairs periodically. All participants meet together from time to time (Mason, 1997).

Similar mentoring programmes have been established at other Australian universities, including the University of Western Australia. The University of Western Australia scheme, however, deliberately matches female participants with invited mentors of either sex. This, they argue, is to encourage men to become acquainted with women's concerns and for women to be exposed to men's knowledge, ideas, networks and skills. For women at higher ranks seeking mentors, it becomes difficult to find appropriate highly ranked females who are able to assist them (Caulfield, 1995; Stanton, 1996).

These mentoring schemes are university-wide, seeking to match proteges and mentors

from different departments, though generally in similar disciplines. They are coordinated by an office of equal opportunity or by a staff development or academic development centre. Most of these mentoring schemes are situated within broader women's leadership development programmes, with group based activities such as information or skill development workshops.

Local Mentors

A second type of mentoring programme is based locally, recognising that the department is a key organisational unit within universities and that there must be responsibility for academic development at that local level. It is not uncommon in US universities, for both male and female new academics to be assigned a (male or female) mentor within their own department at the time of appointment. The mentor is expected to assist the newcomer in orienting to their new environment, locating resources, interpreting local politics, clarifying expectations and providing feedback on their work through periodic meetings (see, for example, Halliburton, 1996).

Being equally available to both men and women, these initiatives are not meant to specifically address the issue of gender balance or the special circumstances of academic women. However, as with any formal assignment of mentoring duties, a departmental (or school or division based) mentoring programme recognises the importance of mentoring functions and ensures that each member of the community has access to someone who has volunteered to play that role and has the endorsement of the community to do so.

In such departmental programmes, unlike the centralised scheme discussed above, there is typically no training for either the mentor or the protege, little monitoring of the relationship and few formal requirements placed on either party. So, although the initial introductions and approach to each other are facilitated, a *laissez-faire* attitude toward other phases of the relationship may mean that a productive relationship is not cultivated or that proteges are not encouraged to gain more independence and autonomy from the mentor as time passes (Kram, 1983). Training or orientations to mentoring might help ensure that these relationships are productive.

Local Mentor Teams

Some departments have acknowledged difficulties with one-to-one mentoring relationships and have moved, instead, to providing newcomers with several mentors or a team of mentors in a many-to-one situation. This approach offers newcomers a greater opportunity to develop a useful and productive relationship and widens the range of skills and experiences available to them. A system of multiple mentors also means that there is a substitute available if one member of the mentoring team is absent from campus for an extended period. A team mentoring approach then is a sort of hybrid between the weak ties, wide network concept and traditional hierarchically based mentoring relationships.

Designated Departmental Mentor(s) or Professional Enhancement Convenor

In this type of scheme, designated people in a department or school look after professional development issues. Thus, like the previous model, mentoring is seen as a local responsibility that depends upon discipline-specific and department-specific knowledge and experience. The term mentor may be misleading in this approach since

it does not revolve around individual, one-to-one relationships, although the designated person does perform many mentoring functions. Instead this person may be better referred to as a professional enhancement liaison or convenor.

As an example, Syracuse University in the US created a system of trained teaching mentors in which each department nominates a person who looks after the proper preparation of graduate teaching assistants. Designated mentors learn to work appropriately with inexperienced teachers in their departments by participating in seminars coordinated by the Center for Instructional Development and sharing knowledge and experience with others in similar positions across the university. This structure provides a liaison between departments and the Center for Instructional Development on teaching enhancement issues.

This model could be adapted to cover a range of professional enhancement issues including, but not limited to, teaching. Designated mentor(s) might have responsibility, for example, for organising a local orientation event for all new academics within a school or department, for individually consulting with each new academic periodically or for organising seminars on research grant writing skills.

Formal Networking or Peer Relationship-building Schemes in Universities

There are several practical strategies that can be put in place in universities that are rooted in collegial networking models, rather than hierarchical mentoring models. Figure 3 summarises the mentoring and networking schemes discussed.

Collegial Support Groups

At the University of Otago in New Zealand the women in leadership programme has built on networking concepts in the formation of collegial support groups. Valerie Clifford (1996) writes that the goals of the programme are to develop women's leadership skills and knowledge; to identify organisational change strategies that support women's involvement in decision-making processes; and to build a network that supports women in leadership positions (Clifford, 1996, p. 3). Following a two-day residential conference, groups of 8–15 women are established. The groups meet monthly in pursuit of professional development plans. Groups may invite speakers or advisers to contribute particular areas of expertise. Together with a variety of workshops, a newsletter and an electronic listserv, all participants have a chance to develop networks across campus. Clifford (1996) contrasts the approach with traditional, one-to-one mentoring relationships, arguing that the collegial group approach does not rely on a single dyad, is less disruptive if one participant leaves campus, and does not overburden the very few senior women available on campus.

Writing Groups

A specialised form of collegial groups are writing groups. One strand of the joint Murdoch and Curtin University program, 'Scaffolding the Careers of Academic Women' focuses on enhancing the research profiles of junior-level women through writing groups. These groups are smaller, have more precisely targeted objectives and meet more frequently than the collegial groups at Otago. Groups of 3–8 junior-level women meet approximately fortnightly to exchange their writing and provide feedback to each other. The members of a particular group may all be working on the same type of writing

project such as a research grant proposal, theses chapters, conference papers or journal articles (Scaffolding the Careers of Academic Women, 1996).

Journal Clubs

Journal clubs, rather than writing groups, may be more appropriate in the sciences as a way of expanding professional networks and collegial support. Journal clubs are informal seminars intended to provide an opportunity for scholars—particularly students and junior members of a research group—to practice presenting to an audience. Often the talks are focused on a recent journal article of general interest, conference reports or research-in-progress. While collegial support groups and writing groups bring together groups of people who make a commitment to working together over a mutually agreed-upon period of time, journal club seminars may have casual attendees.

Registers of Volunteer Advisers

Each of the models above depends on bringing together groups of people. However, measures can be put in place to assist people in building their networks without requiring a group based activity. A database or directory of volunteers who are willing to answer questions and give guidance in their areas of expertise could be compiled. The directory would allow interested women, junior academics, or newcomers of any rank to read a short biographical sketch and view a photo of the person in order to target people on an as-needed basis who could assist them on given issues. The directory with a photo would make it easier to identify potential advisers at informal gatherings such as divisional seminars or morning teas. Such a directory would also make it easier to approach those volunteers by phone, email or in person.

Orientations and Retreats

Other mechanisms can also be set up to make it easier for newcomers to contact other people available locally. Orientations are an important way to introduce members of an organisation as well as acquaint newcomers with material resources and physical surroundings. To increase the effectiveness of the orientations for networking purposes, they should be done in combination with provision of information about participants.

Information on members of the community may be provided in written or electronic form as with the directory or database described above, or through oral presentation as has been done in the recently initiated Australian National University's John Curtin School of Medical Research annual retreat. At the retreat, each academic presents a summary of their work, offering a valuable opportunity to orient new academics to their new environment and to get to know other people and their specialities (Lafferty, 1996).

Conclusion

One of the key challenges that early career academic staff face is the successful development of professional networks, effective mentoring relationships (Bazeley *et al.*, 1996) and collegiality (Boice, 1992). The development of such relationships is particularly vital and difficult for junior academic women. Academic women face three main issues related to mentoring and collegial networking. Academic women need to: (1) Connect with influential members of their disciplines. Local, departmental support may

Scheme	Description	Key Features
Mentoring Schemes		
University-Wide Women's Mentoring Scheme	University women matched with mentor from similar discipline, different department, on same campus	• University-wide coordination • Training and follow up for mentors and proteges • Mutually negotiated, formal agreement between mentor and protege • One-to-one relationship • Complemented by group activities • Mentors may be women (in some schemes) or either men or women (in other schemes)
Local Mentors or Local Mentor Teams	Newcomers and junior academic staff matched with mentor (or team of mentors) within same department	• Local coordination • No training for mentors or proteges • Variable levels of formal monitoring • One-to-one or many-to-one relationships
Designated School/Centre Mentor(s)/Professional Enhancement Convenor	A designated individual (or pair of individuals) convenes group activities, consults with newcomers and liaises with others elsewhere on campus	• University-wide and local • Support/training provided for departmental convenor/mentor • Group activities are central • One-to-many available
Networking Schemes		
Collegial Support Groups	Groups of 8–15 women meeting regularly to offer assistance/support in professional development	• University-wide (could be grassroots or local) • Mutually negotiated, formal agreement • Facilitation/follow-up for group • Complemented by outside advice/ expertise
Writing Groups	Groups of 3–8 women meet regularly to exchange feedback on writing	• University-wide (could be grassroots or local) • Goals: enhance writing and research profile • Complemented by other program activities and outside advice/expertise
Journal Clubs	Groups meet for presentations/discussion of recent journal articles or research-in-progress	• Grassroots (could be local or university-wide) • Goals: develop presentation skills and keep abreast of items of general interest • Opportunity for junior staff/students to develop skills • Tradition in sciences
Registers of Volunteer Advisers	A directory/database of volunteers who may be called on as needed for advice	• Local or university-wide • Biographical and contact information and photo of volunteer advisers
Orientations and Retreats	Forums where staff can get to know each other and the resources better	• University-wide and local • Opportunity for junior and senior staff to mix

FIG. 3. Summary of mentoring and networking schemes discussed.

facilitate access to these larger national and international networks, though discipline-level schemes may be more useful; (2) develop an understanding of local and professional norms, expectations and resources and cultivate political ties in their own departments, schools and universities. This process involves contact with more experienced members of the institution; and (3) gain psychosocial support for the unique career challenges that

they face. This concern may be addressed through career support networks with other women of all levels of experience across disciplines.

University-based mentoring and networking schemes should not be viewed as a panacea for all of the problems in retaining academic women. However, encouraging a variety of relationships aimed strategically at particular needs may be useful in enhancing academic women's professional development. The strategies put forward in this paper, while not exhaustive, provide a starting place for developing and adapting processes that may be appropriate to the circumstances of particular universities, faculties, schools, departments and individuals.

Correspondence: Kathleen M. Quinlan, Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia. Tel.: (02) 6249 0478; Fax: (02) 6249 4023; e-mail: Kathleen.Quinlan@anu.edu.au.

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