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## Strength in Numbers: Finding the right path

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# Finding the right path

**I COMMEND THE EFFORTS OF LAURA WRIGHT** and her colleagues in establishing the NSF ADVANCE mentoring alliance. Clearly, they recognize the challenges facing women academicians and the need to build avenues of support.

As a fellow woman academician and administrator in higher education, I find considerable relevance in the ongoing, urgent need for guidance for women in general in advancing their careers.

After graduating from Emory University with a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, I initially plotted a career path that would focus primarily on establishing a clinical practice. As fate would have it, my first job offer was as an assistant professor of psychiatry in a small medical school. Although I had not initially planned to pursue a career in academe, I welcomed the opportunity to teach and build a practice through the medical school faculty practice plan.

One advantage of being in a small institution was the ability to quickly demonstrate competence. Without any plan, or clear guidance, I advanced in my career, but often felt “led” and “defined” by circumstance. I did not have a road map and, to some extent, was simply riding the train wherever it took me.

Looking back, however, I realize I never really planned a particular career path. Perhaps I was lucky and happened to land in the right place at the right time.

Throughout my career, I have found that many women struggle to find a clear plan or path. They tend to allow others — or circumstances — to “define” what the next step may be.

I was able to take full advantage of all the opportunities presented to me, and the “train” actually led me to a place that I believe I was destined to arrive. Now, as a full professor and executive vice president and provost at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn., I can truly say that I am headed in the right direction.

My path has been a bit unique, given the type of institutions I have served, and I still sometimes reflect on a phrase I often used with my children: “Mama doesn’t know what she wants to be when she grows up.”

The NSF ADVANCE program resonates with me in that I rarely had the benefit of like-minded, similarly destined individuals with whom to share stories.

There were often times that I longed to consult with someone who would understand my frustrations, my challenges and my desire to find purpose. At all levels there is a need for camaraderie, and we should all do more to help, advise, support and push each other forward.

Whereas there are many workshops, fellowships and academies to “train” and direct individuals toward a particular career direction, these opportunities sometimes fall short in providing follow-up and guidance. A well-defined mentoring alliance clearly provides a targeted effort to assist and guide for the long term.

Given my own experiences, I now wish to help other women who are looking for guidance and purpose. Perhaps it is my training as a psychologist, or my genuine desire to give back. Regardless, there is a need for building alliances, identifying and selecting advisors and mentors, and sharing stories that may help another person find purpose.

Everyone faces challenges in advancing their careers, but it surely can make the walk more pleasant if there is someone to join you along the way. Therefore, I fully support the idea of a mentoring alliance and applaud the



efforts of Laura Wright and her colleagues in providing a resource for women in the sciences.

We should all learn from this and strive to create opportunities for women in other disciplines, emulating the model that has now been established.

— ANGELA WALKER FRANKLIN

*The author, a member of Furman’s board of trustees, earned her degree in psychology in 1981. She was for many years a professor and administrator at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta before moving to Meharry.*