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## Strength in Numbers: Staying on track

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# Staying on track

## ONE OF THE MOST TRANSFORMATIVE

experiences of my career came during three workshops that I attended in the spring of 2005, while I was pursuing my postdoctoral fellowship at Rockefeller University in New York City.

The workshops were titled “Making Sure That Academia Includes You: A Career-Building Workshop for Women in Science.” For three Saturday mornings, women from multiple academic ranks — graduate students to junior faculty members — and from diverse scientific disciplines gathered to learn about coping and advancing within male-dominated academia. The workshops, sponsored by the Gender Equity Project at Hunter College of the City University of New York and by the New York Academy of Sciences’ Women Investigator Network, were intended to help increase productivity and the likelihood of women receiving tenure and promotion.

The first session, “Gender and Basic Foundations,” uncovered one of the defining lessons that I took from the program: the need to build and maintain a circle of advisors.

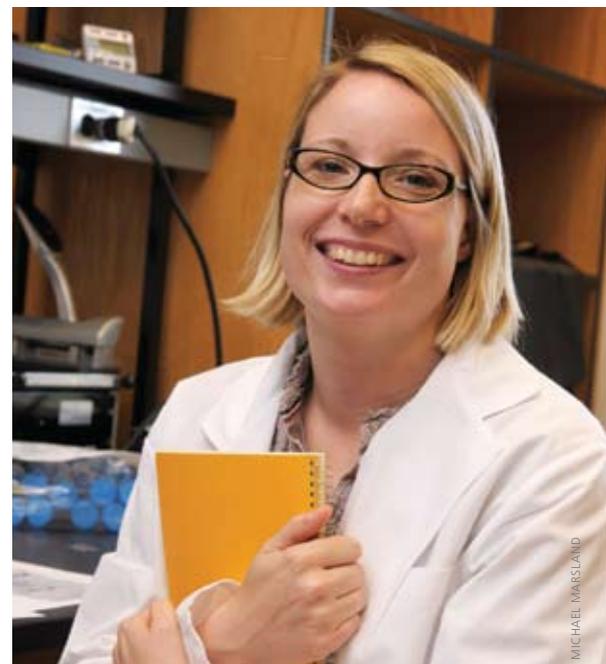
During this session, we did an exercise where we listed areas in which we needed mentoring and advice. As a postdoctoral fellow, I listed such things as scientific direction, writing papers and grants, technical help in the laboratory, and networking in my field. After developing our lists, we then identified individuals who could help us in these areas. I included a few of my postdoctoral colleagues, my husband (who is also a scientist), and my current postdoctoral advisor, each beside a different need.

Through this exercise, I immediately realized that one single person could not — and cannot — provide advice for every aspect of my career. Each person on my list had certain abilities (and time) to advise me in specific areas.

During my days as a biology major at Furman, I had one advisor, Joe Pollard, who helped me develop my class schedule and assisted me in choosing a graduate school. When I began as a graduate student at Emory University in cell and developmental biology, I joined the laboratory of Grace Pavlath to study muscle development.

The graduate student-mentor relationship resembles your relationship with your parents, where you learn about multiple aspects of scientific training and career development. A scientific committee directed my progress in the laboratory, and I garnished additional career advice through interactions with other faculty members. However, these relationships tended to be casual and informal, as opposed to the ongoing, organized relationships that the Women Investigator Network workshops promoted.

When I joined the faculty of Yale University earlier this year as an assistant professor, the lessons from those workshops suddenly came flooding back to me.



Faced with many new decisions and responsibilities — teaching undergraduates, hiring and managing technicians, students and postdoctoral fellows, organizing a laboratory — I remembered the list of mentors I had generated during the workshop. I immediately began writing down the aspects of my new job where I needed advice.

Once I began to make my list, I realized that I had a network of individuals who could help me work through these new responsibilities. Some of them were a part of my formal mentoring committee in my department, but others were colleagues from outside the department and from other institutions.

Each week, one of my former postdoctoral colleagues and I have an informal video conference where we discuss what we do — science — and how we do it — managing our new jobs as assistant professors. It is these kinds of interactions that will help keep me on track in academia, in keeping with the focus and the intent of the NSF ADVANCE project.

— VALERIE HORSLEY

*A 1998 Furman graduate, the author earned her Ph.D. from Emory University. Her specialties are molecular, cell and developmental biology.*