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Strength in Numbers: Building on mutual respect

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WHEN I WAS A CHEMISTRY MAJOR AT

Furman, Laura Wright was the only woman professor in the department. I never thought much about being a woman in chemistry, perhaps because Laura was there or perhaps because the faculty in the department seemed to care only about whether you loved chemistry, not about your gender.

I did not realize how rare it was for her to be the sole tenured woman until I was in graduate school. But knowing that there was at least one female chemistry professor out there provided proof that it was possible for me to be a chemist, too.

Laura was my first mentor and first role model, the first female working chemist that I knew. At the time, in the early 1990s, it was insignificant that she was a faculty member. She was a woman in chemistry.

I met other women in graduate school, but they were mostly graduate students, not chemistry professors. Soon I began to understand the

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rarity of women in the academic ranks in chemistry.

My mentors in graduate school were men and women. My advisor and my colleagues provided me with job training. My colleagues offered much needed support. They were also friends. We respected each other as we worked toward the same goal — enough research to allow us to move to the next phases of our careers.

Graduate school was a heady time for a self-professed geek. Every day was a new opportunity to learn. When things would go well, my fellow graduate students would offer praise; when things went south, they provided much needed commiseration. And I did the same for them.

When I left graduate school, I realized how valuable a support group my lab mates had been. My first academic job was at a brand new college — Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University — which did not have most of the infrastructure you take for granted at an established institution like Furman. I yearned for the collegiality, the solidarity and the joy of being surrounded by people who understand where you are going and what you need to do to get there.

At the time, I did not have anyone close by to offer the support I desperately needed. Laura Wright helped me make a valuable contact — her sister Amy, who is currently the director of the Center for Marine Biomedical and Biotechnology Research at the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute of Florida Atlantic University. In subsequent years, Laura has

provided me with much needed advice on how to handle sticky issues. Her support has been invaluable.

Now, as a tenured professor at Butler University, I still have mentors. Some are colleagues and some are former associates. Some are men, some women. They all supply a much needed support network. But, in some ways, the women offer an additional level of support. They understand the challenge of childbearing (especially as a synthetic chemist), the difficult balance of family and work, and the isolation of women in science in academia.

When I think about the cohort that Laura has joined as part of her NSF grant, I realize she has found a group of people much like my friends from graduate school. This cohort is built upon mutual respect. They are friends, cheerleaders, critics and sounding boards. Her group provides the truthfulness needed from a mentor, with a healthy dose of good will to keep everyone going. Most importantly, her group is cooperative. They mentor each other.

I do not know how my career will continue to evolve. But I would like to believe that I will have help along the way. If it is possible for Laura and her group to find each other, then it should be possible for others, including myself.

— LUANNE McNULTY

Having earned her degree from Furman in 1993, the author has taught at Butler since 2003. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia.

