

HSS Faculty Development Series

Mutual Mentoring: Creating a Supportive Research network

This was the second of a series of three workshops on mutual mentoring, organized by current HSS Administrative Fellow, Dr. Federica Santini, with the support of Associate Dean Carmen Skaggs. The workshop was co-led by Drs. Jeanne Bohannon, Matt Mitchelson, and Federica Santini.

At a time when faculty members at all levels are faced with increased pressure to be productive scholars, strengthening connections with fellow researchers and identifying supportive mentors has become a necessity. We believe that building a strong research network is particularly significant at a time when our university is transitioning toward stricter standards for research and creative activities by faculty members, and many faculty members, both at the junior and senior level, are feeling displaced and isolated in a rapidly changing academic environment. Defying that sense of isolation and bringing scholars together in a meaningful way will help us build a stronger, more productive, and more successful academic community.

Tips for creating, strengthening, and nourishing your research network, by Federica Santini

- 1- Be careful with your travel funds.

Choose wisely: sometimes, a smaller symposium may be more useful than a major conference. Whatever you choose, do it with a specific purpose in mind. Also, consider getting a standing panel and commit to it every year; that way, you will provide a presentation venue for scholars in your specific field, and you will form stronger bonds with like-minded researchers. Finally, when at a conference, force yourself to go to other panels and try a new topic: you'll get to know scholars outside of your immediate field and may discover some new research topics that connect to your work. If you are really daring, go to the gala dinner and don't just stick to your usual friends.

- 2- Say yes to book reviews.

They always take more time than expected and don't do much for your CV, but they are still worth writing. Though it may be somewhat self-serving, you will then have direct contact with the editors of the journal you are writing the review for, while at the same time you will be forced to look carefully at ideas you may be unfamiliar with. And, of course, you will need someone to write a review for your next book.

- 3- Be kind (don't be reviewer B).

We've all at some point received the awful, anonymous remarks from peer-reviewers that tell you your work is worthless and you may as well give up now. This is a vestige of the older, top-down kind of academia that we should deliberately and actively eliminate.

When receiving bad reviews, try your best to ignore them and move on. When you are peer-reviewing, do the opposite. Break the system and be kind: if the article is bad, offer feedback to improve it, list things to be changed, and suggestions for further reading. Being mean doesn't help anyone.

4- Consider co-editing.

Once you have identified (through conferences, peer and book reviews, etc.) scholars who share your research ideas, look at ways in which you may be able to collaborate. Putting together a volume is perhaps the most fun way to write and a great way to create long-lasting bonds with other scholars. And, when you select your contributors, consider some emerging scholars who may benefit from the opportunity. After all, academia should be about collaborating to create something significant.

5- Be there for your collaborators.

We all do it for friends, but how about collaborators? Share publishing venues, make that call when you see an opportunity that may fit with someone, and yes, when they get stuck and their deadline is tomorrow morning, get the coffee going and do the overnight with them. Re-read, edit, advise. It's worth it. Now, no one is saying that you should be 100% available for everyone, but when it's your close collaborators, your immediate research network, it's worth it: you'd do it for your family; well, this is your academic family.

6- Keep up with your reading.

We all get so busy that it can be difficult to find time to look at that new journal issue or page through the newest study in our field. Yet, it is necessary. We all know that we should carve out time for writing; well, we should try to do the same for reading. You may want to set some specific reading goal (one article a week, one book a month?), consider a book club or accountability reading group, or just select (and stick to) a specific weekly reading time. In the end, you may come out of your reading hour inspired to look more into a certain topic and ready to tackle it yourself.

7- Ask for help.

There are times when you are going to feel like your research is not going anywhere, academia is a bleak place, and it's not worth it anyhow. We all do. When you get to that point, do reach out for help. It may take a few attempts, but you will find someone.

8- Remember why you are doing it.

Something kept you in college for a decade, and that was your passion for your field and for teaching: look back for that spark and rekindle it. Be passionate.