

# Enhancing Women's Graduate Education: Workshopping Women's Socialization to the Academic Profession

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## Abstract

This article outlines the impact of a professional development workshop, *Women in Academe*, arguing that it offers a first step in addressing a crucial gap in graduate students' education. Workshop participants' feedback confirms the usefulness of providing opportunities for discussion and strategizing to enhance women's career success in the academy.

## Résumé

Cet article souligne l'impact d'un atelier de perfectionnement professionnel, "Women in Academe," qui soutient qu'il offre un premier pas vers la résolution de l'écart crucial entre l'éducation des étudiantes du deuxième et du troisième cycle. La rétroaction des participantes à l'atelier confirme qu'il était utile d'offrir des occasions pour la discussion et de faire le stratagème pour promouvoir le succès de carrière des femmes dans l'académie.

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## Sharing Stories

During my graduate school career I held a teaching assistant position for two years in a second-year humanities course that explored the connection between the sciences and the humanities. The course invited students to study the lives, work and cultural context of two modern scientists, Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein. The instructor for the course had devised an introductory lecture that encouraged students to understand, from the very first class, just how deeply the lives and work of these two scientists have pervaded many aspects of western culture. During the course of the lecture, he intermittently removed t-shirt after t-shirt with logos that had some connection to either Darwin or Einstein. He had an extensive collection of these shirts. At first, students didn't notice what he was doing, assuming he was just removing a shirt because he was warm. However, as the lecture progressed, the lecture hall would fill with an energized buzz as the students realized he was making a point - and they were getting it - Darwin and Einstein's science pervades our current lives.

I felt exhilarated the first time I saw this lecture gimmick that captured students' attention and interest, and made an important point that they would carry with them throughout the year-long course. As the lecture progressed, however, my own exhilaration turned to concern and I wondered to myself, "Could I have performed this lecture? Could I, a young, academic woman, give a lecture as I removed successive shirts, after shirt - strip off my clothes - and still be seen to be making a valid academic argument and be taken seriously?" I wasn't sure. Recently, upon recounting this story to a

female colleague and raising my concern she simply responded, "Why not?" Yes, indeed, why not? There was a voice in my head that told me it would be inappropriate for me, as a woman, to give such a performance in an academic setting. Did the voice come from within me? Or did it come from outside of me, a voice of societal norms that reach women of all classes, creeds, colours and professional groups? Perhaps it was both as the two are certainly connected. Regardless, it was the first time that I considered how my teaching choices could be affected by my gender.

### **Women in Academe**

Teaching is not the only aspect of an academic career that can be affected by the very fact of being female. Gender can impact upon every aspect of an academic career. Over the last two decades, increasing attention has been paid to the needs of graduate students beyond those encompassed by disciplinary research. Faculty development research has demonstrated quite clearly that there exists a notable gap between graduate student and faculty life. The gaps include: a lack of teacher training, a lack of understanding of the full scope of academic life (research, teaching and service) and a lack of awareness of life-work balance issues as recent graduates pursue their academic careers. As a result of these gaps in graduate education, junior faculty often experience disappointment and disillusionment as they begin their academic careers and spend extensive amounts of time struggling to transition from graduate student to faculty status. This situation has resulted in attrition from the academic profession at the junior faculty level (Gaff 2002; Olsen and Crawford 1998; Trower *et al.* 2001).

One approach that has been implemented towards closing this gap is the extensive creation of professional development programs for graduate students that focus on teaching. Many such programs have been created and research has been done that demonstrates the success of these programs through high satisfaction rates or

comments of participants as they exit such programs (Schonwetter and Taylor 2003; Marincovich *et al.* 1998). Other aspects of graduate student professional development beyond teaching are often conducted on an *ad hoc* basis at the individual, departmental or university level. Some teaching programs do, formally or informally, also include some measure of broader professional development. Guidance is made available for issues such as interviewing skills, creating a *curriculum vitae*, grant writing, negotiating with a potential employer, life/work balance and research/teaching/service balance, networking, seeking a mentor, team work skills, and understanding university policies and procedures (including those for tenure and promotion) (Austin 2003; Rice *et al.* 2000; Wulff and Austin 2004). While some attention has been called to the additional challenges faced by visible and invisible minority groups in this literature (Antony and Taylor 2004), little attention has been paid to the gender component. And yet, there is a wide-ranging literature in the field of women and academe to draw upon.

The literature on women in academe analyzes many issues (see Recommended Readings for a selection of these works). Some of the questions addressed by writers in this field are as follows: Are women treated differently from men as they journey along their academic career paths - as students, colleagues, teachers and researchers? Do women face different life challenges from men in the context of their career as a result of their sex and their gender? Do women learn and teach differently from men? Do students, both male and female, respond differently to, and have different expectations of, male and female instructors? Are women's approaches to research and teaching and the topics they choose accorded equal weight in the context of hiring, tenure, and promotion, as are those research and teaching approaches and topics men choose? How do women find community and a sense of belonging in the academic world? Is critical mass of women in education, and consequently in academe, all that is

necessary to create a welcoming professional world for women? What is/can be women's role as leaders in the academic community? Despite the numerous publications that focus on these issues, very few organized, systematic, public forums exist for women graduate students to learn about, discuss and debate these issues. This appears to be the case despite the efforts of educational developers in Canada and the United States to encourage and promote graduate student professional development to better prepare them to be future faculty.

Women arrive at graduate school with the understanding that they will be undertaking an education in a specific discipline. But what else do they learn about academic life as a faculty member while they earn their degree? At some point in their graduate school career, through their own experience or by observing others', they may wonder if they are, or will be, disadvantaged or treated differently because they are female. They may wonder about their ability to be successful in an academic career based on gender issues. While development programmes for women faculty have been noted in the educational development literature (Brown 2000), a graduate university education rarely includes these issues in any formalized way. In fact, despite the existence of a body of literature on women in academe to draw upon, and a body of literature that concerns itself with the professional development of graduate students, the two groups of literature have not been linked to form a discussion of how gendered concerns can be addressed in the context of female graduate student development and socialization to the academic profession.

In light of this gap in the literature, and in light of my own lived experience and that of the academic women around me, I decided to create a Women in Academe workshop for women graduate students. As Austin and Fraser note, "the graduate school period is an important and complex socialization period" that should include, among other things, "structured opportunities" to discuss the expectations of an academic

career (Austin and Fraser 1999, 3; 18). My intention in this workshop was to provide just such a structured opportunity for women graduate students as a first step in rectifying this gap in their graduate education and professional development.

I designed this workshop with several aims in mind. The first goal was to raise workshop participants' awareness of the numerous ways in which gender might impact on their career, research, and teaching decisions and to highlight the on-going advances being made at the institutional and policy level to correct inequities, illegalities and imbalances. In this context I also incorporated the additional challenges to their role and status faced by women who experience multiple diversities. The second aim was to allow space and time for both individual and group reflection. Time was given to allow participants to consider how gender impacts upon women's lives and work as graduate students and how it might do so as they move forward into academic careers. The third, and I would argue most important, aim was to provide opportunities for discussion, networking, and support for women graduate students at this point in their career so they might share and create strategies for coping with, adapting to, and possibly even changing and challenging the status of women within the university.

I offered this workshop in 2007 at two Canadian universities, one in the Atlantic region and one in the Central region, both mid-sized research institutions. I obtained feedback from workshop participants after obtaining ethics approval at the respective universities. I inquired of participants, via a short, voluntary, written questionnaire at the end of the workshop, about what they believed they had learned from the workshop and what more they wished to learn. The questionnaire also asked participants to comment on their interest in attending additional workshops and events to further their understanding of and extending the discussion of issues specific to women's career success in academe. The feedback I received revealed that many women graduate

students are unaware of the barriers they might face in their careers as a result of their gender and that many were keen to have the opportunity to discuss such issues. Moreover, they had very little idea, as individuals, how to cope with the challenges they might face. The workshop participant feedback exhibited how such a workshop can allow women to collectively pool their resources to achieve understanding and work towards formulating pragmatic solutions or approaches that can be enacted by individuals, or groups of women, to address the gendered concerns that can arise as their academic careers progress.

While disciplinary education is central to a graduate education, another of our goals as educators should also be to prepare our students for the professional world they will be entering as faculty members. Including a gendered component in that preparation that is planned, open to a variety of perspectives, and provides access to tools and strategies for moving forward successfully in their academic career is a first step action that can be proactive and empowering for women and men and productive for the university institutions in which they work.

### **The Women in Academe Workshop**

The workshop was two hours in length and provided a balance of presentational format, along with time for quiet reflection, sharing experiences, paired discussion, and small and large group discussion. At the outset, workshop participants were encouraged to share their own stories, moments of pause, that have raised the possibility of gender inequities in the academic profession with other participants. I invited this sharing by first recounting some of my own moments of pause, including the one at the beginning of this paper.

Next, a brief overview of main issues of concern for women in academe raised throughout the current literature in this field was provided, noting issues of critical mass, glass ceilings, pay inequity, issues of choice and balance, the differential treatment women

may receive as teachers and researchers from their students, colleagues and publishers based on their sex, gender issues, or nature of their chosen research area. The literature also draws attention to the lack of mentoring and networking support available to women and the lack of clear regulations in procedures for applying and interviewing for jobs and for attaining tenure and promotion in academe that is compounded by the lack of formal or informal guidance through mentoring. Finally, issues were raised such as the following: the backlash against feminism over the past decade, the subtle discrimination women face today (as opposed to more overt forms of discrimination that have to some extent been combated by legal and policy interventions), and the challenge of multiple diversities faced, for example, by women of colour.

At this point, after a reflection exercise that allowed participants to envision their ideals of university life and discuss their beliefs and experiences in this context, a statistical presentation followed that drew attention to the reality of Canadian women's experience in academe, along with some supporting qualitative quotations from the literature. This presentation covered the topics of women's higher education, position in the workforce (in general and specifically with reference to academe), and the additional challenges for women who are visible minorities and/or seeking a reasonable life/work balance as they raise families. For example, with respect to education the *Women in Canada 2005: A Gender-Based Statistical Report* published by Statistics Canada (2006) notes that the number of women obtaining a university degree is increasing. In 1971, 3% of Canadian women 15+ had a university degree, in 2001 the percentage had increased to 15% of Canadian women with a university degree. They argue "this has been one of the real success stories for Canadian women" (2006, 89). However, women still hold small shares of the math, science and engineering doctorates (2006, 92). Turning to the workforce, in 2004, 47% of the Canadian workforce was female (2006, 103) but pay

equity is still an issue with women who, according to a recent report in *Canadian Living* (Malchuk 2006, 208), are still earning only 64% of what men earn and are still more greatly represented in the traditional female workforce as nurses and teachers, as opposed to the traditional male occupations of doctors, lawyers, engineers and politicians. Statistics Canada demonstrates that while women who are also visible minorities tend to have more education on average than Canadian women in general, they are nevertheless less likely to be employed and more likely to fill traditional female jobs (2006, 224-225). Yet women are increasingly moving into academe, both as students and as professors. In 2002-3, 26% of university tenured faculty was women (*University Affairs*, April 2005). However, women are not moving at the same rates into full professorships or Canada Research Chairs and wage gaps, while smaller than those in the general Canadian population, do still exist, and significantly so for part-time as opposed to full-time academics (Robbins 2005).

While more and more women with children under 16 years of age are in the work force, and there are more and more day-care spaces available, Statistics Canada reports that women are still far more likely to take time from work for personal or family matters than men (2006, 105; 108-109). Also, it is well-known that the primary child-bearing years (25-34) are often the key years of academic career development (Robbins 2005). This last issue leaves women, and increasingly men, in a double-bind over whether or not to have children. A United States study found that 12.6% of academic men and 25.6% of women had fewer children than they wanted, in order to "achieve academic success" (Drago *et al.* 2005). In addition, "non-mothers" often feel they carry the burden of work left by women who take maternity leaves and who maintain on-going care for children (Ramsay and Letherby 2006). Attending one workshop cannot, of course, eradicate the systemic and institutionalized gendered nature of many of the issues raised in this part of the workshop

presentation, but my aim was to provide this information as an impetus for encouraging women graduate students to be aware of the *status quo* and reflect upon how these issues might affect their individual circumstances.

The last hour of the Workshop focused on an exercise that invited participants to consider how they might best address the challenges that women face in academe. There were six areas for discussion most relevant to women graduate students and included undertaking controversial research, networking and mentoring, answering questions on job interviews, transforming curriculum and pedagogy, student/teacher interactions, and life/work balance issues. Participants presented possible strategies after working in groups on a particular issue outlined in case scenarios. I also presented additional strategies that are offered in the literature to facilitate women's career success in academe that were not raised in discussion (Collins *et al.* 1998; Gerdes 2003). In the context of each issue, discussion often centered around when it was most advantageous for a woman to work within the system to best advance her career, and when it was necessary for her to confront the institutionalized structures that continue to disadvantage women, and women of colour, as a group.

#### **Workshop Participant Feedback**

The Atlantic region university workshop was attended by 20 participants, five of whom were men, and at least three of whom were faculty members. Of the 15 participants who completed the questionnaire, two were men. At the Central region university the workshop was attended by approximately 110 participants, a few of whom were men. However, only women completed the questionnaire at this university. Of the 53 participants who completed the feedback questionnaire, 40 were graduate students, 12 were faculty members (including one from a nearby college) and one was a staff member.

When participants who completed the questionnaire were asked, "Did this workshop allow you to become more aware of the

gender-related issues of concern to women in academe?" the majority of participants answered "Yes": 12 of 15 at the Atlantic region university and 44 of 53 at the Central region university. Of the remainder, five noted that it rather "confirmed" and "reviewed" what they knew, one answered "somewhat," one questionnaire was left unanswered, two answered "not really" and two answered "no." One of these "no's" was qualified by answering that she was "living them now and am very aware of women's issues" and one of the participants who answered "not really" wrote, "I am an immigrant from Mexico who worked at a University for the last eight years and had encountered discrimination and had to prove myself to the male society."

When asked in what way the workshop had made them more aware of gender-related concerns for women in academe, participants mentioned particular issues they had not been aware of before the workshop, resulting in comments such as: "The statistical overview of differences showed some surprising gaps that still exist." (Graduate student - Atlantic); and "I was surprised by the pay inequality statistic. I thought the issue had been taken care of already." (Graduate student - Central); "I did not realize that so few women progress to upper ranks of tenure." (Faculty member - Central); and "I am concerned that an academic life for women with family/children is difficult...That there is perpetual internal conflict re: demands, needs and guilt" (Faculty member - Central).

Several participants at the Central region university were reassured by attending the Workshop that they were not alone in their concerns: "It was good to know that other people have similar experiences" (Faculty member) and another faculty member commented that it was good to "realize how many people are interested in these things. I expected a small group of women." Others commented that they were pleased at, "Hearing stories from others, it's not just me!" and "...it validated my concerns. Often, one feels isolated in these worries" (Graduate students). In addition, some graduate

students thought that such workshops provided food for thought and preparation for the future. A graduate student at the Atlantic region university noted, "Some issues are not immediately obvious at the graduate level. I feel more prepared for the issues ahead of me." Similarly at the Central region university a graduate student commented, "It definitely made me more aware of the challenges I may face in a department when applying for a faculty position - but it also highlighted those things I will be sure to look for...."

When asked what they would like to learn more about, participants at both workshops listed individual questions and concerns and an array of issues were noted. Generally, participants expressed an interest in more time to discuss strategies to meet the challenges women face: "Spending more time on the issues at the end [strategies] would have been nice." (Graduate Student, Atlantic University) and "I feel like I am aware of the issues - need to work on overcoming the barriers (e.g., strategies)" and "Actual, effective strategies. What can graduate students do to effect change?" (Graduate Students, Central University).

Each participant was then asked to comment on the Workshop activities she found the most and least beneficial in understanding her own experience as a woman in academe. Most participants that responded noted that any aspect of discussion, including sharing stories and working through strategies together were the most beneficial workshop activities: "The group discussion was great - get the shared experience, which helps you reflect on your own" (Atlantic) and "Sharing stories was helpful...something we often don't make the time to do" (Faculty member, Central) and "The portion of the presentation that dealt with solutions - this I find is the biggest struggle. Recognizing the problems becomes frustrating when one feels they cannot make changes" (Graduate student, Central). The importance of creating community and working collectively for women's success in academe can not be stressed enough, particularly as Barbara Lovitts has argued that

"[i]n a nutshell, non-completers' graduate school experience is best characterized by the absence of community" (Lovitts 2001, 108). Comments on aspects of the workshop which were least beneficial to participants understanding of their own experiences as women in academe were spread across individual proclivities with none clearly identified as being collectively without benefit to participants.

The over-whelming response of participants at both workshops, when asked which strategies they would be most likely to implement, was that they would seek out networks and mentors: "Mentoring, both finding a mentor and being a mentor. Being connected to others is key. The academic world (for men and women) can be isolating" (Faculty Member, Central University); and "Mentoring and Networking. My field is male dominated, but only now have I noticed that I am lacking the companionship of female friends!" (Graduate Student, Atlantic University). In a recent review of the mentoring literature by Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Jung Yun they note that while there is an increasing emphasis on the need for multi-mentors, a network of mentors, "researchers and practitioners are still struggling to determine which mentoring models and practices best support" faculty of colour and women (Sorcinelli and Yun 2007). Despite the emphasis on mentoring and networking, taken alone the faculty members at the Central region university most often commented that they would make use of the research-related strategies. At the Atlantic region university balancing work and family was a close second to mentoring and networking.

The last question on the questionnaire asked participants if they thought it would be useful for them to attend other activities that focus on issues for women in academe. At the Atlantic region university all 15 respondents said "Yes," although one qualified this response as follows: "Definitely, in an ideal world! However, with a limited amount of time in each day, I feel that from this workshop alone

I am already well equipped to move forward in life as an academic and a woman." At the Central region university, 11 of 12 faculty members responded "Yes" to this question and 35 of 37 graduate students responded positively, as did the one staff member. Comments made in this regard included, "This lecture was a great first step - it would be nice to follow-up with smaller focus groups" and that more activities would be useful "In order to encourage and continue dialogue about these issues and the importance of socializing female academics to all aspects of academia."

Participants were then asked to note the kinds of events they would like to attend in the future and the topics they would like to see covered. The responses were wide-ranging with several comments suggesting a more in-depth focus on each issue addressed in the workshop. One participant suggested, "Maybe run a series focusing on each of the scenario topics"(Atlantic University) and another noted "The topics discussed in this presentation could be the focus for a deeper look at certain areas, a smaller more focused workshop" (Central University). In addition, activities and topics not addressed in the workshop were also recommended, including interest in panel discussions that present male and female academics' experiences and strategies, workshops to role-play strategies, an "after session" to harness the energy created by this workshop, small group discussions and support groups, focus on queer issues and issues specific to women in science.

Marci Schoor Hirsch and Lisa Berman-Hills in their article "Strategic Women" (Hirsch and Berman-Hills 2004) argue that "to 'win' at the career game, a woman must be able to think and to act strategically...she must first conceptualize what she is seeking to achieve using a strategic mind-set; second, she must be able to act strategically to successfully execute the plan she has envisioned" (2004, 189-90). Graduate student participants communicated their realization that they lacked knowledge and understanding of issues for women in

academe and noted their interest in learning more. They also highlighted their desire to be given opportunities to share experiences and work collectively to devise strategies for successfully dealing with these issues. Participants also noted this need for working together by stressing their realization of the importance of mentoring and networking to a successful career in academe.

### Conclusion

To close the workshop, I read aloud a quote by Wanda Thomas Bernard from her article "Claiming Voice: An Account of Struggle, Resistance and Hope in the Academy" (Bernard 2003), that I believe captures an important perspective that academic women need to take on as their own to find success and contentment in their academic career:

....I have learned to say I am not superwoman and to believe it. I have learned to say no and not feel guilty. I have learned to delegate. I have empowered myself to assert my rights. I have learned to ask for help when I need it. I have learned to establish priorities and boundaries. I have learned that my silence will not protect me. I have learned to work with allies. I have learned to break the power of silence when it needs to be broken. I have learned that my experiences form a lens through which I see the world and interact in it. I have learned to appreciate all of my experiences, for struggle leads to resistance, and resistance enables me to reclaim hope. I have learned that sharing my experiences is also an act of empowerment. (2003, 77)

In response to this reading, one participant at the Atlantic region university wrote: "The final quote helped sum up all that I am working toward now. I hope that one day I can use that quote as evidence of where I am." Although the statistics and the stories in the literature on women and academe often

paint a pessimistic picture of the inequalities women still face as they pursue an academic career, I designed this workshop to focus on how women can learn about, cope with, and even challenge the *status quo*, to ensure a more desirable experience for themselves and for all women in academe. Women must work both as individuals and collectively for change, they must also, as several workshop participants noted, involve men in creating these changes. As Keith Louise Fulton has noted, "The universities that we need to make changes in our lives and in our society, we also need to change" (Fulton 2006). It is my hope that workshop participants not only took the workshop and what they learned therein back into their own lives, but have and will continue to share it with others, building an academic community that is welcoming to women and a positive environment for all academics, their students, and university administrators alike. It is also my hope that readers of this article will do like wise, devising their own workshops and forming their own groups to provide opportunities for sharing stories and collectively creating strategies that will assist women not simply to survive, but to thrive, in their chosen academic careers.

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