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When Women Faculty Write: The Power of Community in Scholarship

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Abstract

With the variety of teaching and leading roles placed on faculty members within higher education institutions, finding time to engage in scholarship can be very challenging and often problematic. One way to support scholarship requirements, is finding like-minded colleagues who can provide encouragement and assistance in such efforts. This article describes the formation of a women's faculty writing group at one Christian higher education institution, and how the support from within that group, helped to facilitate and increase each member's scholarship agenda and productivity.

The work of faculty members is multi-faceted, even when employed at institutions with a teaching focus. Teaching, scholarship, and service are typically required of all faculty members. Depending on one's institution, it is not unheard of for teaching teams and professional learning communities to be available to support faculty (Houfek et al., 2010). However, in many institutions, there appear to be few supports for faculty scholarship. As a result, scholarship is relegated to the bottom of the list when the demands of teaching, grading, and meeting with students take priority. Yet, scholarship has the potential to advance the mission and objectives of the university. We also know that scholarship informs one's teaching and should not be an add-on or a luxury, but a necessity to provide a strong education for our students. So how can women support one another in scholarly pursuits? To answer this question, we offer our story of a new venture for seven women from one Christian liberal arts university.

In the fall of 2013, our requests for scholarship support were met with the inclusion of credit hour load for a tenured faculty member to provide assistance to interested faculty. The two of us booked monthly one-on-one appointments with our colleague and found that we were immensely productive and motivated. When our colleague left the university at the end of that year, we realized this practice of regularly meeting and receiving support was critical to the success of our scholarship goals. Therefore, a plan was needed!

Desiring a focused and intentional commitment to scholarship, we met to talk about a model to support each other. Without credit load for a faculty member to continue the support we had, we committed to continue monthly meetings with each other. As the conversation progressed, it was clear that there could be a stronger way to support scholarship by strategically inviting a small group of scholars to meet together, to support individual scholarship agendas and goals.

Creating this type of writing group required consistent dedication to scholarship, willingness to support others, interest in meeting regularly with the group, and commitment to make the writing dates a priority, even as we each held varying roles in our college. We also wanted to intentionally keep the group small. Together, the two of us identified five women we were interested in approaching with this idea. Of the seven in the desired group, two had achieved tenure, three were within one to two years of tenure, and one was a new hire. Two of the five had previously been a part of a writing team: One was a part of a writing team that analyzed data and wrote jointly, while the other was a part of a writing team that met regularly but wrote individually. The group included two undergraduate faculty and four graduate faculty, representing four different programs within the College of Education. The group also included faculty with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method methodology experience. All faculty in the proposed group had published at least 3-5 articles, among other publications and scholarly activities. These demographics were important and strategically identified to maximize the expertise in the group and, therefore, provide a strong resource base to the

members of the group. Once we identified the faculty we wanted to include, we sent out an invitational email where we briefly described what we hoped to build. When each faculty member indicated interest in gathering to talk further, a date and time was set. The women around the table expressed their own need for support and accountability. With consensus on creating a group, we moved to discuss what we wanted to create.

The goal of our first meeting together was to gauge interest and create a plan. It was apparent from the first few minutes into the meeting that there was interest on the part of all invited. It was important that group norms were discussed, negotiated, and established prior to our first writing group session. In this way, everyone knew the expectations, and we could begin with common goals and trust. This was an important step in building relationships with each other.

As we continued through our journey of establishing a formal writing group, we desired to find a common time which would work for all seven women. This seemed like a daunting task considering our various roles in teaching or administrative duties. However, after carefully examining our calendars already filled with teaching slots and meetings, we found a common day and time once a month that miraculously worked for everyone. Occasionally members had conflicts which they could not avoid, but all did their best to keep our writing day and time protected.

We decided to structure our writing time for four hours each session. The rationale for the four-hour timeframe allowed for the following structure: check-in time at the start (30 minutes), individual or group writing, and then debriefing at the end (about 30 minutes). This was a similar model established by Grant (2006), and Penney et al. (2015). The middle section of the writing session allowed for each member to focus on her work in the way that best met her needs.

The opening 30-minute slot was important in building our relationships and trust with one another through the writing process. During this time, we updated the group on what we had done (or not done) since the last meeting, and what our goals were for our own writing time. Each woman had her own strategy of keeping track of her work, whether it be a spread sheet, word count, or other organizational methods. At every writing session, we updated our shared Google Doc, which tracked each member's goals with progress reports. In this way, we were transparent with each other, encouraged by progress the group was doing, and kept ourselves accountable in the process. We had a place where we could celebrate our writing successes or encourage one another through any challenges or failures. Each time we met, we could proceed with our writing goals, or begin again and get back on track with renewed energy and focus.

In addition to our monthly writing time, a commitment was made to review each other's work as needed. For example, *Author 1* had several colleagues who provided important feedback on a piece she was turning into a manuscript. The input from these trusted colleagues provided key insights she needed to improve the piece, but also the encouragement to continue on with the entire process. In turn, *Author 1* has assisted with the work of others through either reading writing selections, or brainstorming ideas. All of these parts have been critical in the support of the group members. *Author 2* helped to review grant applications and also edited the work of fellow group members. All members benefitted from the joint expertise in the group by giving and receiving support in the areas of APA expertise, quantitative analysis, research design methodologies, and locating journals or other sources for our work. One member especially was an example for all of us, as she modeled time management to the group indicating how much time she could allow for the review process. In this way, she set clear guidelines based on her schedule. In addition, a couple of members, desiring additional side-by-side writing time, began meeting together regularly outside of the monthly meeting for an hour a week to further their writing goals.

The structure for our monthly writing meetings helped each of us to eliminate the excuses which could keep us from our writing time and writing goals. By working together off campus at an undisclosed location, we limited potential interruptions by students, colleagues, or staff. We could then focus on the time we had set aside to pursue our scholarship and writing agendas without the tyranny of the urgent getting in our way.

Finally, one of the highlights of our group was to be able to celebrate the writing accomplishments of our colleagues. One of *Author 2*'s articles was named as the article of the year for a Taylor and Francis journal. Another member received an award as a *Science to Achieve Results* (STAR) fellow for early career math and science faculty. Another was named undergraduate researcher of the year. One member had her book chapter accepted. All told, we submitted 14 manuscripts, four grant applications, and 16 conference proposals. Our engagement in focused scholarship also assisted in four members receiving university research leave for the following year. This was significant in that only five

research leaves are awarded each year for the entire university.

Shared Resources

As our group continued writing together, we also shared resources and ideas that were helpful for organizing and tracking our writing projects. One book was especially helpful for several members: *Writing your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* by Belcher (2009). Although this resource was primarily written for graduate students, the weekly strategies and plans are useful reminders for faculty members at any level. Members also found the worksheets particularly helpful. Another resource, *How to Write a Lot* by Silvia (2007), provided an encouraging, yet humorous take on the writing process. Some of the members particularly appreciated this resource because it provided encouragement in the writing process without making them feel defeated.

Sharing different digital applications was another way to help us keep track of time spent on various projects. Toggl (Toggl, 2014) was a favorite of several members, as they tracked not only scholarship time, but time spent on other aspects of their work. The Toggl support then sends a weekly email that summarizes the time logged for each project. This is particularly useful in identifying what tasks and activities typically tend to consume your time.

One member shared the resource known as Pomodoro (Cirillo Company), and the related research that supports the concept. One sets a timer for 25 minutes, then when the timer goes off, you stop your work and rest for five minutes. The cycle continues and then allows for longer breaks. The rationale is that one is much more productive with scheduled breaks to refresh and let the brain rest.

Another important resource was the Inbox Pause feature on Google mail. This tool allows you to pause your inbox on the Chrome browser so that you are not receiving notifications of emails, which can tempt you to respond to an email and become distracted from your work. Adding the email pause was helpful for several members, as they wanted to remain free from work distractions as much as possible during our group writing time.

Author 1 had another strategy as she continued to find ways she could maintain focus and progress on her work. She realized that if she wrote at least 333 words a day, by the end of 28 days, she would have the equivalent of 9,324 words, which equaled a full manuscript. This strategy was very helpful as she was nearing the completion of several projects and was able to stay on target with her deadlines. Another member added word counts to her tracking spreadsheet after reading *How to Write a Lot*, which provided a specific and measureable goal for writing sessions.

Another very helpful resource one group member found was *Every Semester Needs a Plan*. This is actually a free webinar, and provides carefully selected ways to plan out your goals for the entire semester (Rockquemore, n.d.). The premise of this resource is that if you do not have a plan for your work, your semester will quickly go by and most likely will not have accomplished as much as you had hoped. This resource contains helps and suggestions for people with varying needs in their professional and personal lives, and is adaptable to most situations.

Recommendations

As we reflected on the year, we are able to point to dispositional and behavioral changes that were made. For *Author 1*, even though she was already tenured, the writing group provided the space and focus to stay on track and fine tune her scholarship agenda. She developed a system for tracking progress, and also wrote with others regularly during the weeks in between the writing group. *Author 1* also began mentoring a junior faculty member from another department who needed the scholarship and writing support to further her opportunities for promotion and tenure at the university. This became a professional highlight for *Author 1* as she supported another colleague in the area of scholarship and research.

Our writing group time became valued and almost sacred. *Author 2* described a number of times when she would get grumpy if other things got in the way of her writing schedule. *Author 1* also had the same reaction, noting that she sought to protect the times that she had scheduled her writing time. The more *Author 2* published, the more she began to identify as a scholar and, therefore, was more willing to share her research and work with school partners and other external stakeholders.

If you are new to academia, or an experienced faculty member, where do you start? How do you create a plan? What do

you have to offer? These are often the questions asked by faculty wishing to establish themselves as scholars. If you see yourself in this space, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Intentionally connect with colleagues and create a writing/scholarship support group. This is important, even if your institution does not emphasize writing and scholarship, as it will inform your teaching. This will also make you a better faculty member and help to establish you as an expert in your field.
2. Anticipate where you might get derailed in the writing process. Consider the end of the semester and the end of the school year. These are typically the heaviest for any faculty member and can derail your best laid plans. Anticipate those heavy times and plan accordingly. Use backward design for your scholarship. Consider where you want to end your year, and then back map this by setting your goals and objectives for each term (Linder, Cooper, McKenzie, Raesch, & Reeve, 2013). Consult the website “Every Semester Needs a Plan” (Rockquomore, n.d.).
3. Share your work. When you are first beginning, you may feel you have nothing to share or write about, but you do! Recognize that you are a professional, with insights and expertise that need to be shared with others.
4. Connect and partner with your librarian. She can help with journal selection and can be instrumental in finding journals on difficult topics.

Conclusion

The women’s writing group provided a sense of community and collaboration where scholarly pursuits were set as priority (Hampton-Farmer et al., 2013). This collaboration is especially critical for women due to the challenges they face in gender roles and in attempting to meet the academic requirements as women (Penney et al., 2015). Grant (2006) explained that women who gathered together to write must make a conscious decision to make themselves a priority as opposed to serving others. This is necessary because female faculty members are often less successful in publishing than their male counterparts, often putting promotion and tenure in jeopardy (Penney et al., 2015).

The significance of our writing group cannot be overstated. The majority of the group members struggled with intentional time for writing. Through the community that was created, the group provided the support, encouragement, and mentoring to move our work forward and meet our own individual goals without becoming derailed by other demands. Each member was encouraged to structure their semester by intentionally planning for scholarship. Members shared that they regularly log scholarship hours each week as a result of the writing group. In addition, scholarship made the priority list, and is now viewed by several members as a seamless piece of their work as a faculty member, and no longer an add-on or something relegated to late night hours.

Each institution has their own requirements for promotion and tenure, including the standards for scholarship. It is important for each faculty member to understand the culture and requirements of their own institution from the start, and incorporate scholarship into a regular part of their work plan. At our institution, scholarship has been a major factor in the promotion and tenure process. While there is not a formal program for connecting people to writing groups, it is highly encouraged. For senior and tenured faculty members, this becomes an opportunity to help further the career of another colleague. In this way, we are modeling biblical principles by serving each other.

Finally, believing that God calls us to our professions in higher education, that call must also then translate to our scholarship. As we carry out our call through our scholarship, the perceived competitive component is then lessened as we focus on the biblical aspects of our work. For our group, the foci of most of the women’s writings centered on social justice issues. This is directly tied to one component of the conceptual framework of our College of Education: promoting justice. As Micah 6:8 (NIV) states, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

The creation of a group of like-minded women, committed to Micah 6:8, the mission of their university, and their own professional growth, provides the support and encouragement women need to continue their journey in higher education and pursue a healthy scholarship agenda.

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