Chapter 4
Successful STEM Women of Color Must Network Differently

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ABSTRACT

Overcoming barriers for women of color in STEM can be eased not only by what you know, but rather by who you know. Women are always encouraged to network, but often are not given the full instructions on what the outcome of the network could or should be. Seldom are they mentored to network in ways that they are viewed as contributors who bring impact and value to the discipline. The purpose of this chapter is to provide some guidelines from lessons learned about networking not only through the author’s experience as a faculty member moving through the ranks, but as a university administrator, and a leader in a national organization. The chapter will have examples of various ways that women of color can contribute through networking to create opportunities to make significant impact to their discipline. The chapter will also reference some key books and articles that share some of the most pertinent work being done.

INTRODUCTION

Importance of Networking

Women of color who select to pursue careers in academia are faced with a myriad of barriers with a major one being isolation in their departments and their disciplines. Such isolation makes it difficult to navigate the tenure and promotion arena,
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opportunities for professional growth, and leadership roles. Universities always state that you have to excel in research, teaching, and service. However, the obstacles that one must overcome to excel in each of these areas, while also trying to balance your personal life is a difficult task.

It took me many years to understand how to network effectively and how to ensure that the relationships I was building were mutually beneficial to my professional career. I must admit, going through various aspects of my doctoral and postdoctoral training prepared me well to be a great researcher, but not to be a “networker”. I learned a lot through the years by trial and error. At times I felt that I knew what I was doing, and at times I had to figure it out. I hope to share some of my experiences in this chapter with the goal that the reader will find it easier to navigate the professoriate by being a strong and more equipped networker. It took me time to understand good practices for networking, and much of what I learned came from the literature by Bradford (2014); Coburn (2014); de Janasz et al. (2008); Fisher et al. (2000); Lippe-McGraw (2019); Marcus (2019) and Spurk et al. (2015), as well as personal interactions.

Figure 1 shows a general framework that may be taken into consideration for networking. A primary goal is to be engaged. Effective engagement requires that you believe you can make a difference and that others also believe that you can make a difference. The three significant components toward being able to do so require (1) trust between network members, (2) sense of belonging within a network, and (3) volunteering time and expertise. If this is successful, then the overall experience should lead to a net worth for you and you will feel that this network relationship is of benefit to you.

In my early years as a faculty member I learned of the importance of strategic plans for organizations. I immediately decided that I needed to establish a strategic plan for myself. If the success of an organization could be influenced by a strategic plan, then it was appropriate for me to establish a strategic plan to help shape the direction for my career. I found that having a strategic plan helped me conduct a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities and threats) analysis. Knowing what I needed early on was critical to identifying what type of networks and relationships I needed to build.

I now encourage any graduate student, postdoctoral fellows, assistant professors, or anyone starting a new career path, to start by building a strategic plan that will shape the direction they wish to embark on in the next 3-5 years. Establish your goals and have a metric and a timeline to let you know how you will know when you have met these goals.

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