



## A Network of Our Own

Many WICB columns have addressed the importance of mentoring relationships between junior and senior scientists. What's missing is the view from our peers who face challenges similar to our own in both time and place. Peer networks not only contribute mutual support but also group intelligence, and are particularly important for scientists who may be isolated or set apart from their colleagues (for example, by being the only woman in a department, or the only single father).

This column describes two strategies: one, a formal network described by Ellen Daniell in her recent book, *Every Other Thursday*,<sup>1</sup> and the second, an informal network called the X-Gals, authors of a continuing series of columns in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.<sup>2</sup> Although very different in structure, these two networks share several features. First, they are safe places for their members and maintain confidentiality. Second, they are noncompetitive: The members aren't trying to establish rank within the network. Third, they are problem-solving groups, with a focus on professional issues. Finally, they are friends, encouraging the members to enjoy the good as well as confront the bad.

### A Structured Group

"Group," the network in Daniell's book, was founded by several University of California, San Francisco, faculty over 30 years ago. It was inspired by a psychology movement that promoted a collective approach to problem-solving. Originally including men and women who were working toward tenure, Group eventually evolved into a group of eight women scientists from different Bay Area institutions. Many of them have now spent over 25 years together. Some readers may recall a presentation from Group members at a WICB event during the 1994 ASCB Annual Meeting.<sup>3</sup> Daniell writes:

*"The objective of Group ... is cooperation in the competitive world. Group members seek both practical solutions for specific problems (such*

*as dealing with a difficult boss or employee) and broader perspective on our lives. Group helps counter the all-too-common experience of professional life as a combat zone in which nobody seems to be on your side .... Anyone who feels isolated in a professional or competitive setting or who wants honest feedback can benefit from a group, a safe testing ground where everyone is on your side."*<sup>4</sup>

Group has regular, structured meetings. Each member asks for a certain amount of time to discuss an issue. The members use code-words: a *pig* is a negative self-perception; a *contract* is a concise description of goals; a *stroke* is an encouraging compliment to another member. Members are discouraged from *rescues*, or taking responsibility for another's problems.

Daniell's book is not a how-to manual in setting up a formal network, although it provides that information.<sup>3</sup> Reading the book provides a virtual network itself, with Daniell explaining strategies for common problems and describing "pigs" that many

of us harbor. As these high-achieving women describe the challenges they have faced, the reader may feel a jolt of familiarity. The book also describes setbacks in professional careers and real lives, as when Daniell describes her tenure denial, or another member describes the loss of her beloved partner. Thus, it's a fascinating biography of a cohort of women scientists and what it took for them to survive and thrive.

### An Ad Hoc Network

In contrast to the formality and history of Group, the X-Gals are young women beginning their independent careers who have a long-distance, *ad hoc* network. They are:

*"nine female biologists who began meeting weekly over a few beers in 2000, as several of us wrote up our dissertations.... As we graduated and took far-flung jobs and postdocs ... we have continued the dialogue through an e-mail discussion list.... What began as a survival mechanism for a*

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*few female graduate students has become an incredible motivational force and a sounding board vital to our lives and careers.”<sup>2</sup>*

In their series of columns in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, they take turns discussing issues of mutual concern. Strikingly, most of their members are not on the “traditional” academic path, and they ask “are women ‘choosing ourselves’ out of an academic career, or is the traditional path of the academic profession so hostile to women that we feel we do not have a choice?”<sup>5</sup> The series of X-Gals columns<sup>6</sup> reflects on these and other issues, informed by the views of the network. *The Chronicle* columns do not reflect the support function of the network *per se*, but evolve into broader reflections about careers in biological science that come from their network experiences.

*“We all have searched locally for mentors but found few. Perhaps that is one reason our e-mail group is so important to us: We help one another negotiate the competing demands of our roles, in no particular order, as scientists, partners, and mothers....”<sup>2</sup>*

The X-Gals network was begun in proximity but continues, thanks to email, over long distances. Thus, a network need not be formal or local to be functional.

As Daniell reminds us, “intimacy and reliance on others for encouragement and advice is a source of empowerment, not a sign of weakness.”<sup>7</sup> Both Group and the X-Gals encourage their members to achieve their goals, even though their strategies are different. Their experiences make it clear that all scientists, from junior students to senior professors, can benefit from a peer community. No one needs to do it alone. ■

—Susan L. Forsburg for the  
*Women in Cell Biology Committee*

## References

<sup>1</sup>Daniell, E. (2006). *Every Other Thursday*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Louis, L. “The X-Gals Alliance,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (6 October 2006). <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i07/07c00101.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>Peer Mentoring @ UC Berkeley, “Beyond Survival: The Evolution of a Women’s Professional Problem Solving Group.” Workshop, The American Society for Cell Biology Annual Meeting, 1994. [http://ga.berkeley.edu/academics/peer\\_hist.html](http://ga.berkeley.edu/academics/peer_hist.html).

<sup>4</sup>Daniell, p. xii.

<sup>5</sup>Murray, M. “Too Few Choices,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2 February 2007). <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i22/22c00101.htm>.

<sup>6</sup>Women in Biology Internet Launch Pages (2007). <http://www.womenbio.net/>.

<sup>7</sup>Daniell, p. xii.



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