

# How to Counter the Isolation of Academic Life

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*By Trisalyn Nelson and Jessica Early*

Faculty life can be lonely. The traditional academic model requires you to demonstrate autonomy in scholarship and teaching. Both the tenure process and the metrics for tracking faculty progress (e.g., Google Scholar, Scopus) emphasize individual success. Loneliness is especially problematic if you work at a small institution, in an uncongenial department, and/or in a discipline full of introverts. If you have ever shown up at the office and seen every door in your hallway shut, you will know what we're talking about.

But don't be fooled. Especially in today's scholarship culture, which increasingly values interdisciplinary work and socially embedded research, few people make it in academe purely on their own.

A better pathway to success is to find allies and advocates. We like to think of a support network as an ecology — a living, breathing, ever-shifting collection of connections and contacts that needs time and attention to nurture and grow.

Your ecosystem needs to be diverse, especially as you advance in your career. Your supporters should include someone who can pour the tea (or wine) when you get rejected, someone who can help you read the indecipherable instructions of a grant application, and someone who can cover your class at the last minute when your kids start throwing up.

We both have benefited from a strong support network. Sometimes that support was like an unexpected gift — we were just lucky to meet generous people along the way. But other times, we were aided because of relationships we had carefully fostered. Four categories of support have been essential in our careers. In this month's column, we look at each category and highlight tips and tricks for growing your own professional-support network.

Senior mentors in your discipline. If you are lucky, you got along well with your dissertation adviser and committee members, and those relationships are very likely to continue after graduation. Senior mentors are critical to your career advancement and to a healthy ecology of support. They can also provide a broad and long-term sense of the field. A senior mentor will write reference letters, answer questions you are afraid to ask out loud in your department, and advocate for you in quiet ways without you ever knowing.

Both of us are tenured professors now, but we still rely on and treasure our long-term connections with senior scholars. It took time to develop those relationships, just like any trusted friendship. Here are some tips:

- *Show gratitude.* We don't just mean thank-you cards and the occasional drink. When these people turn to you for assistance, meet their requests quickly and to the best of your abilities. If a supportive senior scholar asks, "Can you review a proposal?" the correct answer is always: "Yes, I can!" Then do the work.
- *Show recognition.* Nominate your senior mentors for awards and help them achieve the recognition they deserve. Go to their talks at conferences and spread the word about their good work and support.
- *Show respect.* Senior mentors are pulled in many directions, and it's good to respect their time and rank. When you need their help, make it easy for them to aid you. If you need a letter of reference, offer to write a draft they can modify, or give them bullet points to work with. We reserve our pestering of these people for the big questions like: "The dean just called and asked if I want to run a new program. Should I accept?"
- *Pay it forward.* Invest in junior colleagues the way you have appreciated people investing in you. Or, if you lacked a good senior mentor, feel free to break the cycle and be the person you wish you'd had in your professional life earlier on.

Colleagues in your field on other campuses. Building support among people who are in your discipline, at your same rank, is critical to both your productivity and your sanity. Among the most valued are co-authors and collaborators who work at other institutions. You may team up with those folks on grants, papers, student committees, or national organizations and conferences.

Even if you're in a field that values solo-authored work, disciplinary colleagues will keep you intellectually challenged and give you a much-needed lateral perspective. As all of you move up the ranks at the same time in the same field, you will grow a shared professional and personal history. How do you cultivate such support?

- *Start small.* Someone you meet on a conference panel or randomly during a scholarly meeting could become an important part of your support network. Maybe you hear them describing their work and you think, "that sounds like a different take on what I do." Stay after the panel and talk. Share your excitement, exchange emails, follow up, see if this is someone you want to share ideas with and plan a collaboration.
- *Only work with people who energize you.* These are the people who get things done in ways that complement your work style and interests. Whatever qualities excite you in a colleague — for us, it's things like a sense of humor, a positive energy, and a fast pace — look for those things in people you meet. At the same time, be careful not to surround yourself with people who only tell you what you want to hear. True support is sometimes challenging.
- *Find true peers.* That means a supportive colleague who is at the same stage in their career as you are in yours, and who can work with you as an equal.

Senior mentors and colleagues on your campus. Once you are hired by an institution, you may want to find guidance close to home. For example, you may need someone to translate the weird ways your new institution works: Does my college really expect 100-percent attendance at every faculty meeting?

It's critical to have good colleagues you can rely on within your department. They may not be in your specific subfield but are people you collaborate with on campus committees, teaching, or in leadership roles. They may have an office down the same hallway, and you can build connections through shared conversation, humor, and frequent informal check-ins.

Among the best ways to create your on-campus support network:

- *First, look into the official mentoring programs.* After you arrive on campus, read the menu of options and sample what appeals. You will learn quickly which things are helpful and which ones give you heart palpitations. Either way, you sometimes get a free lunch out of the experience (what can we say, there is a little graduate student left in all of us).
- *Find what you need and when you need it.* Some institutions set up one-on-one mentoring between a senior professor and a new hire. Others offer ongoing support to help you prepare for tenure and promotion or improve your teaching. Strong faculty and staff associations may also offer workshops and lectures to help you build your professional network.

- *Go for coffee.* You might be one of those people who think, "I'm not at work to make friends." Still, building relationships with departmental colleagues is critical to find people with whom you can share teaching and service responsibilities. You need someone you can call to help cover your class at the last minute when your kid ends up in the doctor's office. You need someone who will reply when you send a message at 10 p.m. because you're feeling anxious about your tenure case (even if that reply is only, "Drink more wine"). In short, you need a few departmental colleagues who know you as more than just someone who is always too busy to chat. Just be prepared to reciprocate. Only ask of others what you would be willing to do for them.
- *Don't be a gossip.* There is nothing more harmful to your career than gossiping at work. Believe us, we have learned this the hard way. After a faculty meeting, it's OK to debrief about a problematic new policy or a shocking display of unprofessional behavior (not that that's ever happened to either of us). It's nice to have somewhere to unload before you get home and cook dinner with your family (who many not want to hear you rant about Professor So-and-So for the thousandth time). You need allies who are with you in the same institutional foxhole. But differentiate debriefing from passing on potentially inaccurate gossip or contributing to unkind behavior.

Staff support. Staff members are the fuel in the departmental engine, the wind beneath the institution's wings, the caffeine in your coffee — well, you get the idea. They are the folks who get it done, whether it refers to course scheduling, travel reimbursements, or research-assistant hiring.

Professors sometimes forget that. Sadly, we have seen faculty members be dismissive or downright rude to staffers. Being kind, responsive, and grateful to the staff is not just the right thing to do, it's also a strategic part of building your support network.

For advice on how to build a good relationship on this front, we turned to staff members on our own campus. Here's what they suggested:

- *Be a good human.* Take time to get to know staff members. Spending even a few minutes learning about their lives, work, or interests can help you build a positive relationship with people who help make your work life easier.
- *A little gratitude goes a long way.* Take the time to say thank you. Write a note (and cc their supervisor). Bring doughnuts or cookies to the office once in a while. Contribute to an annual staff gift.

- *Be sensitive to their working conditions.* Staff schedules are not flexible. They have to be on the campus during daily business hours. By contrast, a lot of faculty work can be done almost anywhere, and that's an awesome perk. We work at all hours and in all sorts of locations — in the office, at home, on vacation, even during transit. Most staff do not have that benefit. When classes break for the semester, faculty members get a freedom that staffers do not enjoy, and it can feel hurtful when a professor returns after a month off asking, "How was your break?" They didn't get a break. Instead, ask: "Did you manage to get any time off?" or, "Did you get a change of pace over the break?"
- *Help staff get to know your work.* They want to know. It helps them understand and feel pride in the teaching and research mission they are supporting. Talk about your latest project with staff members. Participate in a faculty-staff brown-bag series to share your work (if there isn't such a thing, consider organizing one).
- *Staff members are busy, too.* In our administrative roles, both of us regularly are approached by staff members asking us to email certain professors who aren't responding to a staff request. You're only hurting yourself in the long run if you ignore staff members who are just trying to help or do their job. By leaving things to the last minute, you create work for people who already have enough to do, and they may well remember the next time you come asking for their help.

Let's be honest: Not everyone we include in our network provides support. Some would-be mentors are not all that helpful. Some people just love to give free advice and some offer way too much. There is such a thing as too many cooks in the kitchen. If you are in a formal mentoring program and aren't getting the help you need, it is OK to nod respectfully at that person and then go and find others who actually can help you.

Having a support network that operates as a dynamic ecology means that people will move in and out of your world. If you have a colleague who is no longer reciprocating or who breaks an important confidence, it's OK to end the relationship or change how you interact.

Once you have a network in place, make sure you do your part in championing those who support you. Work hard for them. When those trusted colleagues ask for help, say yes. Help with the heavy lifting on your joint research, writing, and other projects. Be forgiving of mistakes, and catch your supporters if you see them falling. They will do the same for you, and you can hold each other up.

Don't forget to be your own best advocate — both for yourself and your work. What that means in practice: Don't qualify or apologize for your ideas. Don't isolate or shutdown. Listen to the views and advice of others, but be sure to trust your own instincts. Take care of yourself as well as you take care of others. After all, the most important part of your support network is you.

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