

Calling the Circle: A Peer Mentoring Approach



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Introduction

More than their male counterparts, women leaders experience isolation and disconnection from colleagues in their disciplines. As part of the ADVANCE Project, Comprehensive Equity at Ohio State (CEOS), monthly peer mentoring circles are being offered to tenured women scientists and engineers. Peer mentoring circles allow women leaders to bring career and personal challenges to a safe group for reflection, collective problem solving, and empowered solutions.

Mentoring positively affects job satisfaction, institutional commitment, and promotion/retention rates, and reduces work and family stress (Baugh & Scandura, 1999; de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Moody, 2004; Nielson, Carlson & Lankau, 2001). Women, however, are disproportionately denied access to mentoring (Niemeier & Gonzales, 2004; Smith, Smith, & Markham, 2000). As described by Daniell (2006), these circles are about “support, discussion, and practical application of common experience to individual problems... the group approach derives its strength from numbers...” (p. xiii).

About the Circles

- Participation is voluntary.
- All tenured women in the CEOS’ colleges (Colleges of Biological Science, Math and Physical Sciences, Engineering, and Veterinary Medicine) were invited to participate.
- Twelve to fifteen women compose a circle.
- Three circles were configured in June 09 based on diversity of disciplines and scheduling preferences.
- The circles meet monthly, for a two-hour period.
- A minimum of six members must be in attendance for the circle to meet.
- The circles are facilitated, and rely on a structured approach to meaningful interactions.
- The circles have a basic structure of agreements, principles, and practices.
 - The agreements establish norms for group process.
 - The principles provide guidance for trusting in the group’s resources and intention.
 - The practices govern what individuals offer the group.

Evaluation

The desired outcomes include:

For individual circle participants:	For The Ohio State University:
Support in taking focused and purposeful action, and	Increase retention rates of tenured women scientists and engineers, and
A strengthened sense of belonging and community.	Increased number of women in formal and informal leadership positions.

Evaluation methods include:

- A questionnaire implemented six months after the start of the circles, and again after one year and two years will assess:
 - How well the circles are functioning,
 - How well circle participation is contributing to an increased sense of community, and
 - To what extent participation is increasing the number of informal leadership roles the women are assuming.
- Institutional data will be used to track:
 - Retention rates of circle participants,
 - Career progression, and
 - The number of formal leadership positions circle participants hold.
- Reflective essays written by each circle participant at the end of the first and second years will be analyzed to examine participants’ value of the circles.

Conclusion

The peer mentoring circles at The Ohio State University are still very new. Started in summer 09, forty-three of ninety tenured women expressed interest in participating. Thirty-nine women participated in at least one circle gathering, with most participating in two. While the intent is for the same three circles to continue for a full two years, some reconfiguring was necessary for fall 09 to accommodate members’ schedules. Thirty-five women are expected to participate in the fall circles, beginning with a meeting the third week in October.

Across the three circles, themes that have arisen from the discussion topics include:

- Career and life transitions,
- Responding to subtle biases,
- Understanding self as something greater than “scientist”, and
- Positively influencing younger women.

A challenge facing CEOS is how to define and form a circle for “women of color.” While there is great interest in meeting the needs of this population, it is a small population. A first step toward this effort is to hold a luncheon this quarter. Women who have self identified as non-Caucasian will be invited to come together to share their needs and respond to the idea of a circle for “women of color.” In essence, this luncheon will mirror the strategy and philosophy of the peer mentoring circles. The specific population of interest will come together to reflect, collectively address the issue, and seek solutions.

References

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CEOS Peer Mentoring Circle Questionnaire				
1. I am comfortable expressing myself when participating in circle.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. Circle participants respect the confidentiality of what is shared in circle.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
3. Participation in circle is a time for reflection on my life.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
4. Circle participants help each other resolve the challenges they face.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
5. As a result of participating in a mentoring circle, I feel empowered to take action on the challenges I face.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. Participation in a mentoring circle has helped me navigate OSU.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
7. Participation in a mentoring circle has enlarged my network at OSU.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. My sense of OSU as a supportive community has strengthened as a result of participating in circle.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
9. Participation in a mentoring circle has increased the likelihood that I will stay at The Ohio State University.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
10. Feeling confident that I will advance in my career has been strengthened as a result of participating in circle.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. I am personally benefiting by my participation in a circle.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
12. I am professionally benefiting by my participation in a circle.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
13. Participating in a circle is a valuable use of my time.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
14. Since summer 09 (start of the peer mentoring circle) have you taken on any new responsibilities				
• In your department	___ YES		___ NO	
• Within your profession/ discipline	___ YES		___ NO	
• At The Ohio State University	___ YES		___ NO	
• Other, please indicate:				
15. How has circle participation influenced your thinking about leadership?				
16. What might strengthen your circle experience?				



A Circle of Project CEOS’ Members