Taking Action: COVID-19 Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Challenge

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Title:

Small Groups as countermeasures to isolation and stress: Implementation of Action Collaboratives as a modern reflection of feminist co-mentoring frameworks

Brief description:

We offer the use of small groups, termed Action Collaboratives. Action Collaboratives provide opportunities for faculty participants to share concerns, challenges on how to survive and thrive as they navigate the ongoing COVID pandemic. Through Action Collaboratives and community activities, participants share experiences, coping strategies, dependent care challenges, and research interests. These spaces also provide opportunities to amplify social support and mental health well-being.

Description:

We offer the use of Action Collaboratives - intentionally designed and curated small groups - as an innovation worthy of recognition in addressing long-term impacts of COVID-19 on DEI in STEM.

The COVID-19 pandemic has distinguished itself as an experience that amplifies feelings of isolation and associated stress (Horigian et al., 2021). Among university faculty, the pandemic has disproportionately impacted women (NASEM, 2021). Like many disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new inequities, but perhaps more importantly has highlighted inequities that are foundational and entrenched in our academic systems (Malisch et al., 2020)

In response to both the systemic challenges of academia and the COVID-19 crisis, we established the Multi-Campus Transformation and Equity Network (MCTEN), a program that uses small groups (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2008) to address faculty isolation and stress, particularly reported by women and other faculty with historically excluded and underrepresented (UR) identities. As a result, these faculty, despite having higher objective measures of productivity in terms of publication, sponsored research, and service, are less likely to be recruited, retained or persist in STEM fields.

Action Collaboratives reflect established feminist co-mentoring frameworks. Feminist co-mentoring has been shown to promote mutuality, empowerment, support, and an eradication of a hierarchical competitive structure - the last a critically important feature of equity under the impacts of COVID, and likely to continue to be a factor in credit and promotion as we emerge from the pandemic. By definition, a feminist co-mentorship framework values collaborative interactions between participating individuals rather than a 'one-up' relationship where one individual is perceived to have all the knowledge and disseminates it to others (McGuire & Reger, 2003). This framework also takes into account the social contexts and the ways in which external and environmental factors may work to complicate the success of women scholars in academia.

Our nomination centers on the use of small groups, or Action Collaboratives, as the effective unit of activity, and we detail the use of two associated practices to build a community of practice and sponsorship, where we define sponsorship as the practice of engaging in externally-facing actions such as advocacy, visibility, promotion, and connection to engage with and support a protege. Here we describe the theory that inspired our approach, outline the specific activities that we have found to be impactful, and report some initial outcomes that make us optimistic about the long-term impact of our intervention.

Small Group Theory and Action Collaboratives

The importance of informal networks in advancing faculty careers has been clearly documented (Daphne et al., 2021), but the existing composition of the STEM professoriate, along with the strong effects of implicit bias, homophily/similarity/liking (Cialdini, 2001) makes informal networks more likely to advantage majority participants. In addition to the very real advancement opportunities afforded by informal networks (that closely align with the best practices of Sponsorship, i.e., advocacy, visibility,

promotions, coninections), informal networks can be very effective in reducing factors of underrepresented faculty fatigue such as feelings of isolation, stress related to perceptions of productivity, imposter syndrome effects, and other social/emotional taxes on well-being and sense of belonging (Dabos and Rousseau, 2013). Social feedback can either ameliorate or exacerbate issues of belonging, stereotype threat, appropriate aspirations, and leverage peer- and near-peer mentoring effects for both positive and negative outcomes. Action Collaboratives are a partial solution where we make the impacts of informal networks explicit for historically disadvantaged faculty.

Forming Action Collaboratives

Through an inclusive outreach process, we recruited and organized seven Action Collaboratives at SDSU in Fall 2021. The participants are primarily women and women-of-color, but also include some men who have identities that are historically excluded in other ways (e.g., sexual/gender minorities). Each Action Collaborative includes 4-6 early-career and/or UR faculty. Each Action Collaborative also includes two sponsors: 1) a campus DEI expert (a scholar of JEDI topics who is an experienced practitioner within the campus context) and 2) a senior scholar capable of providing or facilitating sponsorship actions within their discipline. Importantly, the Sponsors were selected to ensure separation from any promotion and tenure processes related to Action Collaborative members.

The Action Collaboratives were provided with scheduling support - a critically important feature, to facilitate monthly meetings. Additionally, the Action Collaboratives were provided with a small subset of curricular content on leadership, DEI, productivity, navigating conflicts and other similar topics. The activities of Action Collaboratives were not prescriptive. Other than meeting (either in person or virtually), Action Collaboratives were left to design their meetings in whatever structure best fit their faculty's needs.

Limiting the input of "top-down" prescriptive activities allows the practical implementation of an asset-based approach where the assets of the participants are centered as the critical knowledge for exchange. This too leverages feminism and feminist scholarship and knowledge at its best by modeling awareness of the interlocking systems of oppression that often play out in the lives of diverse women (Anzaldua, 1987; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1987), which can be amplified by deficit-based EDI approaches. Maintenance of the Action Collaboratives as a participant-led space also welcomes the inclusion of honest dialogue regarding issues of equity particularly as it relates to the experiences of underrepresented minority populations (Goerisch et. al, 2019) and the overall heterogeneity of individuals who identify as women.

Building communities of practice

We paired our Action Collaboratives with two associated activities that focused on building a robust and resilient community, specifically around the academic experience and research activity. These included creating spaces to support virtual weekly writing sessions and longer multi-day writing retreats.

Dedicated Writing Spaces

Building a community of practice has been shown to strengthen connection among participants. One way we developed a community of practice was to use our Action Collaboratives as a launchpad for virtual Dedicated Writing Spaces (DWS). SDSU

supported the formation of 4 one-hour virtual convenings each week, branded as DWS. DWS leverages influential effects of community building (McNeely, J. 2000), superordinate identity (Kane, A 2010), fresh-start theories (Dai et al., 2014), commitment devices (Rogers et al,. 2014), and mutual accountability (Rashid, 2015). Simply by providing the structure for faculty to set aside and then attend DWS sessions has significantly elevated both productivity and feelings of connectedness and belonging among our participating faculty.

Writing Retreats

In-person community activities have necessarily been curtailed during the pandemic. As academic institutions, colleges, and departments are composed almost entirely by the interactions of the individuals who participate in them, the breakdown of in-person interaction has caused further breakdown in the stability of units that faculty rely on to feel connected and productive. To directly combat this, we leveraged the functions of the Action Collaboratives to design and execute an in-person Writing Retreat January 15-16, 2022.

Mindful of health and safety, the conference facility selected provided rooms with separate outdoor entrances, and with an outdoor pier/dock (see attachment) as a convening and work space. The retreat enabled participants to engage in both individual and collaborative work, and afforded participants with a safe, low-pressure environment in which to make real connections with colleagues.

Our post event survey found that all respondents would attend the retreat again if given the opportunity. Participants were asked to rate their overall experience, 5 being the highest (An excellent experience) and 1 the lowest (Not a good experience) all participants rated the experience either a 5 or a 4.

Measuring impact

Our primary metrics to measure the impact of our interventions are feelings of isolation and feelings of stress experienced by our participating faculty. Both metrics have been shown to disproportionately impact women faculty during COVID-19 (Horigian et al., 2021), particularly women faculty from under-represented identities. To understand how both factors changed in response to our activities, we employed Ecological Momentary Assessments. Ecological Momentary Assessments (EMA) involve repeated sampling of subjects' experiences in real time in a subjects' natural environments. We used EMAs after every small group meeting to assess how participants' feelings of isolation and stress were affected by the intervention. In Fall 2021, 91% of respondents indicated that their participation in Action Collaboratives made them feel less stressed and 80% reported it helped them feel less isolated.

Summary

Ongoing COVID-19 disruptions continue to disproportionately penalize women compared with
male counterparts. Disruptions and uncertainty around scholarly output, availability of research/lab time, lack of face-to-face networking through professional conferences, remote
work, and isolation from departmental colleagues have contributed to the reduced productivity of
many female researchers especially in STEM.

The Action Collaboratives, Dedicated Writing Spaces, and Writing Retreats have provided opportunities for participating women and other UR faculty to be in community as they navigate professional and personal challenges during the ongoing COVID pandemic. These activities have afforded participating faculty more resources, a stronger foundation, and a safety net to weather both COVID-19 and systemic challenges of academia.

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