Creating our own community

When we were starting our Ph.D. studies a few years ago, we both felt something was missing. As women working in the male-dominated sciences, we wanted to connect with peers and mentors who could help us thrive, but we couldn’t find any active, campus-wide groups to join. So, we took it upon ourselves to create one. It’s been a lot of hard work; at times, it has felt like pursuing a second degree on top of our Ph.D.s. But it has also been tremendously rewarding.

It began about a month into our first semester of graduate school. Cecilia had already started the paperwork to create a group for women in science, and Anya—who had served as the vice president of such a group at her previous institution—jumped at the opportunity to help. We hoped to address challenges around recruitment and retention of women, harassment, lack of mentoring and role models, and outdated institutional policies. We worried that we might be biting off more than we could chew. But we were convinced that this was vital work, and that if we didn’t take it on maybe no one else would.

We recruited other graduate students in our department to join us as the first officers. In our initial meeting, we brainstormed about how to define our nascent group and how we could address diversity issues and engage with people of all genders. We ultimately called ourselves WiSci, short for Women in Science, and developed a mission that we hoped would appeal to a diverse audience and encourage all scientists to participate: to promote equality in the sciences through mentoring, networking, and career development.

Lacking funding, we had to start small. When speakers visited to give departmental seminars, we co-opted an hour of their time for brown bag lunches. The speakers described their career paths, discussed how they managed work and personal obligations, and gave us thoughtful encouragement. We received positive feedback, but attendance was frustratingly low. We needed to think bigger.

Our big break came when we received funding to host a career symposium. We began planning nearly a year in advance. We decided to organize panel discussions and workshops on topics that are relevant to all scientists—including work-life balance, job search strategies, goal setting, and communication—but we showcased women’s perspectives by inviting only female presenters. Early on, we expected about 50 participants, but as people began to RSVP, the number grew to more than 100. Both of us were doing summer fieldwork while we were in the midst of planning, forcing us to coordinate speakers, schedules, and logistics across three different time zones with spotty internet—no easy task.

But, in the end, it came together. The senior female scientists offered valuable and inspiring lessons. In addition to giving general advice, they spoke candidly of their decisions about when to have a family, of living apart from loved ones, and of staying true to themselves professionally and personally. They impressed on attendees the importance of learning how to negotiate more assertively and never apologizing for being successful or ambitious.

After 2 years of working on our fledgling group, it was extremely gratifying to see that it had helped people from across the university make new connections. We also felt vindicated in our resolve to persist despite the low attendance early on. From the success of the symposium, and our growth since, it’s clear that we’re addressing a university-wide need for a supportive network of female scientists.

We’ll both be on the job market in the next few years, and what we’ve learned from leading WiSci will be useful in any career. We have gained tangible organizational skills, and we’ve grown more confident about our ability to identify and address issues affecting women in science. Wherever we end up next, we’ll take the knowledge and strength that building WiSci instilled in us.

Cecilia Sánchez and Anya Brown are doctoral candidates at the University of Georgia in Athens. They thank the WiSci officers who helped form and grow the group. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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