ABSTRACT

Graduate students often feel pressure to succeed not only as students and instructors, but also as published authors, engaged service-oriented community members, and researchers. As the scarcity of tenure-track positions and the general downturn of the economy become increasingly disconcerting, we often feel it necessary to sacrifice personal relationships and friendships to focus on making ourselves more competitive as we prepare to enter the job market. In this reflective essay, we consider the ways that we have discovered to navigate these day-to-day struggles, focusing primarily on the significance of informal networks. Although the authors have formed their own informal network through participation in a shared course, we review more traditional methods that exist for graduate students to share concerns, anxieties, and fears with one another. In addition, we briefly explore our shared concerns as female graduate students and instructors.

Key Words: informal networks, research communities, graduate school, occupational stress, coping strategies

The trials and tribulations of the graduate student often seem insurmountable. Many of us feel the need to publish or perish, to engage in service, and to receive acceptable teaching evaluations as primary instructors or teaching assistants. The scarcity of tenure-track positions weighs heavily on our minds and we strive to make ourselves as competitive as possible, often sacrificing personal relationships and friendships to focus on padding our curriculum vitas. Of course, we watch junior faculty make the same sacrifices and perhaps, hoping to one day achieve a similar position, we feel it is necessary for us to make these sacrifices as well. However, in doing so many graduate students may forget the personal and intimate reasons why they decided to pursue a graduate degree. We fre-
quently spend long days and nights in our small cubicles trying to manage our coursework and teaching/research responsibilities, in addition to working on publications and grant proposals. While we recognize that this might be unhealthy, we are more than willing to exploit ourselves in hopes of attaining one grant, scholarship, or publication that will set us apart from our peers.

As we write this, we consider the ways that we have discovered to navigate these day-to-day struggles, emphasizing the significance of informal networks to maintaining our sanity. Generally speaking, many graduate students know that informal networks can provide individuals the opportunity to learn from others who share the same interests and career goals. We have found this truth to be particularly salient in our own lives. The many conversations we have had with one another regarding our individual experiences as graduate students have helped us maintain the critical drive and momentum needed to push forward with our various responsibilities, while also allowing us to reconnect with some of the reasons why we decided to become graduate students to begin with. Some informal networks are formed under unlikely circumstances, while others develop over the course of sustained, everyday contact. The authors met in the latter of these circumstances, in a shared research methods course. Over the course of the semester, through sharing information pertaining to our research in class, we began to share our aspirations as well as our frustrations outside of the course, often grabbing lunch or dinner with one another when time allowed. Establishing meaningful connections of mutual disclosure, support, and encouragement with other graduate students means making a commitment to set aside time for such activities, rather than sacrificing these productive relationships for isolation in a cubicle. We often find ourselves scheduling lunch or dinner dates weeks in advance. It is important to remember that informal networks need not be comprised of students in the same discipline; indeed the authors are from different departments and we are grateful for our cross-disciplinary dialogue (although we sometimes poke fun at one another’s disciplinary homes).

Despite disciplinary differences, we quickly bonded not only as fellow graduate students, but as women in rather male-dominated disciplines. Sharing similar career goals, as well as experiences and concerns, we benefited greatly from one another’s insights and advice. As instructors, we both work to actively engage our students with group and in-class activities. Learning from each other what strategies have worked and failed in our own classrooms has been invaluable. From maintaining authority in the classroom to how to structure essay and other assignments, our conversations and the lessons they have yielded have resulted in better experiences for us as instructors, and undoubtedly for our students as well. Venting sessions have also provided a safe and healthy way to express our anxieties about our work and ourselves. Other networks such as the Women in Geographic Education Special Interest Network, associated with the National Council of Geographic Education, can provide guidance as well as resources to young female instructors. Membership in such professional networks allows for access to more experienced female faculty members who can offer advice on negotiating contracts once a graduate degree has been completed, as well as overall informal moral support.

In addition, there are latent benefits to building informal networks, especially among young scholars. We recognize that fellow graduate students may one day become fellow junior faculty members. The rapport we establish with our graduate student colleagues through collegial interactions in the present may certainly benefit us in the future. We also acknowledge that we must be collegial not only with graduate students within our own disciplines, but those beyond our departments as well. For example, while one of us in a geographer and the other a sociologist, we are both currently ‘Appalachianists’, conducting research in and for the Appalachian region. As scholars then, we share not only an informal relationship that provides
us with emotional support, but a professional relationship that allows us to share research ideas and make informed comments, suggestions, and critiques of one another’s work.

At our university, we find research communities and working groups helpful for connecting with other graduate students outside of our own disciplines. For example, our university offers an Appalachian Research Community as well as a Political Ecology Working Group. Each of the authors is associated with at least one of these groups. These activities ultimately enhance our individual work, but also provide unique opportunities for collaboration. While the binary distinction between our ‘informal’ and our ‘professional’ networks may become somewhat blurred, these complex and messy relationships are nonetheless crucial for our success in academia and beyond.

We are submitting this work in an effort to generate discussion of the successful coping strategies employed by other graduate students. While we would like to advise fellow students to prioritize themselves first and work second, we are somewhat reluctant to do so when we know that research and publications are the coin of the realm, our ticket to the tenure promised land – and that these labors of love take large amounts of commitment and time. Rather, we leave this issue open for discussion and insightful conversation regarding alternative practices for coping with the specific struggles graduate students face in their myriad roles as scholars, educators, future faculty members, writers, researchers, and individuals.