Stepping Stones: A Faculty Development Program to Inspire Women Faculty and Staff

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Abstract

Women frequently benefit from focused faculty development opportunities not because they need to be "fixed," but rather it is a means to demonstrate that success, even in chilly environments, is possible. The *Stepping Stones* program uses a unique design to provide participants with inspiration, time for reflection, and strategies for how to navigate one's career, through hearing about the journeys of successful women. In this article, we describe the program and evaluation results. Post-event and longitudinal follow-up surveys indicate that the program and its unique narrative format help to debunk the superwoman myth and leave participants with a sense of optimism about their future careers.

By many accounts, women are making great strides in higher education. Nationally women comprise 57% of college students (White House Project, 2009). Similarly, in 2012, 58% of new enrollees in graduate programs were women (Gonzalez, Allum, & Sowell, 2013). In 2003-2004, for the first time in history women made up 50% of U.S. medical school matriculants (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2010).

Despite such gains among the student population, progress is mixed among staff at higher levels of administration and all levels of faculty. Across higher education, there are proportionally fewer women at each step in the career ladder (Martinez et al., 2007; National Research Council, 2009). For example, women hold more than half of lecturer and instructor positions, but such positions typically do not translate into leadership roles (White House Report, 2009). Women currently make up 23% of presidents at U.S. colleges and universities, up from only 9.5% two decades ago. In U.S. medical schools, in 2013-2014 women comprised 21% of full professors, 15% of department chairs, and only 16% of medical school deans (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2014).

Literature Review

The reasons for the gender gap among faculty and staff in higher education are complex and the subject of much discussion. The career disadvantages that women face are cumulative over time, such as lack of mentoring (Bickel et al., 2002), tokenism and smaller professional networks (Thompson & Sekaquaptewa, 2002), a chilly climate (Rosser, 2004), and inflexible policies for the integration of personal and professional roles (Welch, Wiehe, Palmer-Smith, & Dankoski, 2011). Further, unconscious biases cause both men and women to overestimate the competence of men and underestimate that of women (Isaac, Lee, & Carnes, 2009; Valian, 1999). This phenomenon plays a tremendous role in academe where peer review, evaluation,

and sponsorship are pivotal to advancement (e.g., Trix & Psenka, 2003; Wenneras & Wold, 1997).

Despite such challenges, many women do effectively navigate academe, advance in their career goals, and enjoy satisfying work. To the junior or mid-career woman, however, the path to career success can appear confusing, complex, and riddled with challenges (Eagly & Carli, 2007). To help decode the "rules of the game," it is critical to develop a greater understanding of women's career paths. It was for this reason that we developed a professional program called *Stepping Stones of Successful Women.* This program aimed to highlight the personal and professional milestones (stepping stones) that successful women took on their journey.

By sharing their journeys across these stepping stones, women are presented with stories that lead to perspective-taking, self-reflection, and exposure to new ideas and experiences that are not as accessible when presented through a text or traditional lecture (Kumagai, 2012). Myerhoff and Ruby (1982) argued generally, and the Personal Narratives Group (1989) argued more specifically for women that that narratives are important for understanding the complex boundaries of our relationships and organizations and illuminate several aspects of gender relations including the construction of identity, the relationship between individual and society, and the power dynamics between men and women. Through the narrative-driven format of our program*,* women are able to take advantage of the opportunities for individuals to empathize and connect their experiences to those of others.

Program Overview

Women frequently benefit from focused faculty development opportunities not because they need to be "fixed," but rather to "warm" the climate and counteract the ways that institutions have traditionally failed to support them (Stewart, Malley, & LaVaque-Manty, 2007).

Successful programs for the advancement of women require multiple, systemic approaches including empowering women with skills necessary for success, addressing institutional policies and inequities so that there are equal opportunities for advancement, changing the culture, valuing relational skills, and increasing the visibility of women (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Drawing upon several of these strategies, the *Stepping Stones of Successful Women* program uses a unique design to stimulate reflection and enable faculty and staff to learn about career development through hearing the stories of successful women. [For a full description of the curriculum and other details of the program, see Dankoski, Welch, Palmer, Hoffmann-Longtin, & Walvoord, 2014]. The goals of the program are to: a) provide participants with strategies for how to navigate one's career; b) demystify the path to career achievement by debunking the superwoman myth; c) broaden available role models of success; and d) provide inspiration and opportunities for self-reflection.

We identify women leaders at our institution (such as department chairs, deans, and high-level administrators) who are willing to share their career journeys in the presence of attendees. There is no formal presentation; rather we conduct an interview with the leaders about milestones in their guest's personal and professional life. Using a semi-structured interview protocol (Patton, 2002), we ask the leaders to tell stories of pivotal moments or "stepping stones" in their career journeys that encouraged their growth or success. Specifically, a small basket of stones of various shapes, sizes, and colors is placed on the table in front of the guest, and each are asked to select a stone to represent a milestone and "describe what this stone represents for you, and how it contributed to you becoming the person that you are." Additional follow-up questions include:

- Did you make any mistakes or wrong turns along the way that you wish you could have avoided? What were they?

- What do you know now that you wish you knew when you were starting out in your career? What advice do you have for women who are early in their professional development?

- What accomplishment do you consider to be the most significant? What are you most proud of? What do you hope to do in the future?

The program format allows the story to unfold naturally and capitalizes on the power of storytelling to stimulate learning. Attendees are encouraged to ask questions at the end each interview.

The sessions are fairly small with 26 attendees on average (with a range of a high of 55 attendees to a low of 14). Total attendance across the 28 sessions was 733. Attendees were predominately female (90%); 65% of participants identified as White, 11% as African-American, 12% as Asian, 3% as Hispanic, and 9% declining to provide information on race and ethnicity. Faculty comprise just under half of participants, with 37% staff and 16% learners attending. The vast majority of faculty attendees were in full-time appointments (91%), with clinical and tenure-track appointments represented equally. In terms of rank, 43% of faculty attendees were assistant professors, 32% were associate professors, and 25% were full professors. Half (50%) of participants were from three departmental areas: Administration, Pediatrics, and Internal Medicine. 80% of attendees were from the School of Medicine; the remaining participants were distributed among a variety of schools. Eighteen percent of the participants (130) attended multiple Stepping Stones events and were invited to participate in a follow-up survey.

Program Evaluation

At the conclusion of each interview, attendees were asked to evaluate the session on a post-event survey. The form consisted of both quantitative and qualitative items. Using a 5 point Likert-scale with 5 being strongly agree, attendees were asked to rate two statements: (a) "The format of today's program (interview format) was interesting and effectively held my attention" and (b) "I would recommend this program to others." The open-ended questions were:

- Please describe in some detail a memorable moment or portion of today's program.

- What is the "take home" message for you from today's program?

According to Kirkpatrick (1994), program evaluation should address four levels: participant reaction, learning, behavior change and/or application, and institutional results. Our choice to ask attendees to identify a memorable moment and a take home message was intended to target the evaluation questions at the level of learning and application.

In addition to the post-event surveys, we conducted an online follow-up survey with all attendees who participated two or more programs from 2008-2015. Our follow-up survey furthered the goals of learning and application, by focusing on the extent to which key messages from the program were retained over time.

Post-Event Survey Analysis

A total of 388 post-event surveys, which yields a response rate of 53%, were completed during the 28-session series. Attendees found the sessions to be interesting and effective at holding their attention, with a mean score of 4.81 (on a Likert scale of 5 to 1, with 5 being strongly agree) and individual session means ranging from 4.28 to 5. Further, most attendees also strongly agreed that they would recommend this program to others (with a mean response score of 4.80 and individual session means ranging from 4.36 to 5).

Responses to the qualitative post-event survey items were analyzed for themes. Members of the research team read the written answers to each open-ended question. As often suggested in qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002), an inductive process was used to determine consistent categories across interviews. Separate elements were placed into larger categories and the research team developed descriptors to represent the sentiment of each section or cluster (Patton, 2002). Researchers then analyzed the relationships among the clusters and developed higher-level themes that drew together several related concepts (Patton, 2002). After returning to the original data, representative examples were identified from the evaluations.

Although many comments were specific to the individual interviews, seven themes emerged from analysis of the post-program evaluation surveys. These themes included: (a) the superwoman is a myth; (b) adversity is common; (c) be flexible and seize opportunities; (d) strength must be developed; (e) support and mentoring are crucial; (f) let your passion direct your path; (g) work hard and persevere. Below, each theme is explained and sample verbatim quotations from the attendees are provided to illustrate each theme.

The superwoman is a myth.

The overriding theme of the open-ended comments was that the personal stories were encouraging, inspiring, and helped debunked the myth of the superwoman. In particular, attendees were able to more easily identify with the guests after learning about the personal and professional journeys. For example, one attendee wrote, "I tend to view people in positions like hers different than myself. Although I don't think a position like that is for me, I find her to be very grounded, sincere, and personal. Thank you!" Another participant shared, "I like hearing about facets of an individual's life that helped bring her to the place she is today, in ways that are

accomplishable by any of us." Finally, another attendee noted that hearing personal stories "is helpful because it makes leadership a whole lot less scary for me."

Many participants also commented that they were helped by the leaders' openness, honesty, and willingness to share their struggles and insights. One attendee remarked, "… was wonderfully authentic in her presentation. I appreciate hearing her story and how she's approached challenges throughout her career and with work/life balance." Another participant stated, "when she talked about needing to relieve stress and went to a remote bathroom to cry—I've BEEN there." Finally, another attendee reported, "I enjoyed the personal family stories because they dealt with real problems and solutions." Based on this review of the program evaluations, we conclude that such personal stories made these highly successful leaders more relatable such that the attendees could more easily envision a path to leadership.

Adversity is common.

The women who participated in our program shared openly about numerous personal and professional challenges. Their struggles were often viewed as important opportunities or significant turning points in their careers that they ultimately framed in positive ways. Many of the women offered stories of resilience in the face of challenge, and many attendees made note of this on the program evaluations. For example, one participant noted that the most memorable aspect of the session was, "Dr. X's discussion of her move [here] with her husband—i.e. didn't have a job, made opportunities for herself. But [she] never felt sorry for herself." Another attendee stated, "I appreciated hearing about taking an opportunity that did not work out and how she worked through that situation." Attendees voiced feelings of reassurance that even these high achievers had struggled with issues common to many women: "It really helped me to see that Dr. X had encountered some obstacles in her career path. I appreciate how she dealt with

them and how she views them now." Many attendees mentioned the guests' optimism as allowing the leaders to successfully deal with adversity.

Be flexible and seize opportunities.

Often times, attendees' perception of the take home message was around the importance of remaining flexible in one's career and life and the willingness to take risks and seize opportunities when they arise. This included recognition that changing paths can be important for growth and success, particularly for women in science and medicine. One participant commented that her take away message was to "be open to recommendations about something you might not have thought about doing in your career." Another wrote that she will remember that "even though things at the time don't seem perfect, you should be grateful for the opportunity life has given and know that when one door closes, another opens." Additional comments about the need to be flexible included: "keep my mind open to possibilities for leadership" and "non-linear paths can lead to success! Being receptive to opportunities is a good way to go." Finally, it was noted, "it is okay to forge an alternate path and move away from what doesn't work." Developing the attitudes and skills necessary to become more adaptable emerged as a critical component of success, particularly when faced with very challenging circumstances.

Strength must be developed.

Many attendees commented that they appreciated hearing about the emotional challenges that women leaders often face. For example, one participant wrote that "talking honestly about disappointment [is] very powerful when a person is real." Further, some attendees observed that disappointments should be expected and even these very successful women had to learn how to stand up for themselves. In noting this take home message, one attendee shared, "don't take certain situations personally." Another commented, "do not be marginalized and get credit for

your work." As part of the series, attendees discovered that learning how to develop a "thick skin" is a critical skill of highly effective women leaders, and is a process that often involves the support of others.

Support and mentoring are crucial.

Various comments were made about the importance of supportive partners and friends, as well as the value of mentoring and networking. One attendee stated, "I learned the importance of mentors and a support system." Another remarked, "I liked the way the presenter decided how she chose a mentor and also how she encouraged us not to be afraid to ask someone else to be a mentor." Frequently attendees noted that hearing the stories of successful women motivated them to actively seek out a mentor. In sharing next steps one participant declared, "I need to find a new set of mentors (STAT!) and network with male colleagues more regarding advice they've been given from the chair and particular chiefs."

Let your passion direct your path.

A deep sense of commitment to personal values was revealed by many of the women leaders, and numerous attendees commented upon this aspect of the stories. For example, one wrote: "I think it reinforced the fact the people who love their work are more successful." Another participant shared that she feels the need to "be passionate about what you do, every step of the way. Don't concern yourself with the final position." This passion seemed to be inspiring as one participant remarked, "if you know yourself and know what you love to do, the opportunity to excel will present itself." The women interviewed clearly conveyed that they knew themselves well and could identify what mattered most in both their personal lives and their careers, which led to greater success.

Work hard and persevere.

A large number of attendees used the word perseverance in describing their take-home messages. They also frequently mentioned hard work and turning obstacles into opportunities. For example, it was common to see comments like: (a) "Work hard, take chances"; (b) "Define what you love and give it your all; get deliberate, focused"; (c) "Aim high! Yet be flexible in terms of where you land"; (d) and "everything in life that is worth doing is hard."

In summary, several themes emerged from the attendee evaluations, which provide a powerful lens through which to examine the development of women faculty and staff in higher education. These initial post-event surveys indicated that engagement in a faculty development program like this one can inspire and empower women in their careers. Given the challenges women face over time as they pursue their careers in higher education, we conducted a follow-up survey of participants who attended more than one session to further examine the saliency of these messages for our attendees.

Follow-up Survey

Participants who attended two or more Stepping Stones events between 2008 and 2015 were invited to complete an online questionnaire reflecting on their perceptions since attending. After accounting for invalid email addresses, the survey response rate was 50% (N=49). Similar to the program participants, the vast majority of respondents were female (92%). A notable difference, however, emerged between the program participants and survey respondents with regard to role; the proportion of faculty completing the survey was greater than anticipated (41% of participants, 65% of responses), with less staff (37% of participants, 12% of responses) and learners (16% of participants, 5% of responses) represented. This may be a function of time, as learners who attended programs that date back to 2008 would likely be in a new role or have left

the institution when the follow-up survey was administered. The online follow-up survey

included 16 Likert-type questions and four open-ended questions.

The survey asked participants to reflect on their agreement with the seven themes that

emerged from the post-survey results, including the common experiences of adversity, the

importance of flexibility, resiliency, mentoring, passion, hard work, and not trying to "do it all."

The results indicated that the majority of participants moderately or strongly agreed with all

themes, and means ranged from 3.12-3.49 on a 4-point scale. The item "one does not have to 'do

it all' in order to be successful," had the lowest proportion of participants (86%) agreeing "some"

and "a lot" (Table 1).

Table 1. *Attendee Reaction to Themes from Post-Event Survey Analysis*

How much did Stepping Stones increase your level of agreement with the following statements?

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Mean	Std. Deviation
When trying to advance in your career, encountering adversity is common.	49.0%	38.8%	10.2%	2.0 %	3.35	.751
To achieve career advancement you must be flexible and seize opportunities.	63.3%	24.5%	10.2%	2.0%	3.49	.767
To advance in your career, you must develop resiliency.	51.0%	42.9%	6.1%	0.0%	3.45	.614
When pursuing career advancement, mentoring is crucial.	57.1%	34.7%	4.1%	4.1%	3.45	.765
As you advance in your career, it is important to remember that passion should direct your path.	57.1%	36.7%	4.1%	2.0%	3.49	.681
If you intend to advance your career successfully, you must work hard and persevere.	61.2%	24.5%	10.2%	4.1%	3.43	.842
One does not have to "do it all" in order to be successful.	40.8%	38.8%	12.2%	8.2%	3.12	.927

Note. N=49 for all items in Table 1.

Participants were also asked to reflect on how much attending Stepping Stones increased a variety of perceptions of women and abilities emphasized in the series. Again, responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 93% or more responses indicating an increase on every item. The item indicating the lowest reported increase with a mean of 2.80, and 67.3% of responses agreeing "some" or "a lot," was "capacity to not take things too personally" (Table 2).

Table 2*. Attendees' Perceived Increase in Abilities at Time of Follow-Up Survey*

How much did attending Stepping Stones increase your...

	A lot	Some	A little	Not at all	Mean	Std. Deviation
ability to identify with the speaker?	51.0%	36.7%	10.2%	2.0%	3.37	.755
level of resiliency in the face of challenge?	20.4%	61.2%	14.3%	4.1%	2.98	.721
self-assurance regarding your own career journey?*	29.2%	56.3%	10.4%	4.2%	3.10	.751
willingness to take risks and seize opportunities when they arise?	34.7%	46.9%	16.3%	2.0%	3.14	.764
capacity to remain flexible in your career and personal life?*	25.0%	54.2%	18.8%	2.1%	3.02	.729
capability to not take things too personally?	18.4%	49.0%	26.5%	6.1%	2.80	.816
recognition of the importance of supportive partners and friends?**	46.8%	44.7%	6.4%	2.1%	3.36	.705
awareness of the importance of mentoring?**	51.1%	31.9%	12.8%	4.3%	3.30	.858

Note. N=49, except * where N=48 and ** where N=47

General satisfaction with the program was measured using the final Likert-type question asking attendees to agree or disagree with the statement that the format of the programs was interesting and effective, to which all respondents either agreed (25%) or strongly agreed (75%). These positive findings are supported by the 87% of respondents who reported recommending the program to others.

In addition to the previous quantitative questions, participants completed three open-ended questions in the follow-up survey, which mirrored those of the post-event survey. The questions were, (a) What was the "take home" message for you from the Stepping Stones programs?, (b) Please describe, in some detail, a memorable moment or portion of a Stepping Stones program you attended?, and (c) Why did you attend more than one Stepping Stones program?. Responses were analyzed by the research team using the same theme categories and process detailed in the post-event survey analysis. Although all themes were present again, two previous themes and one new theme emerged as predominant.

First, the superwoman is a myth seemed to be a salient theme with many of our attendees in the follow-up survey. Both in the memorable moment and the take home message, many participants remarked how important it was to see successful women share honest stories about the struggle and guilt associated with trying to balance family and work. One attendee commented, "You don't have to choose between professional and personal fulfillment, but it's okay to not do everything yourself." Another attendee echoed the importance of seeing how the featured women sought out support, "Hearing women say that they hired someone to take care of their children so they could focus on their career. We get so much guilt for doing that, it was refreshing to hear women say they are good mothers even though they aren't at every event."

The second prevalent theme that persisted from the post-event survey was be flexible and seek opportunities. Two attendees put it quite poetically, with one commenting, "Careers can take you for a trip that you may have not intended" and another imploring, "Be purposeful with your journey. Take advantage of serendipity. Be open to opportunities." Many attendees made mention of the various journeys to be taken, using phrases such as "lots of different trajectories,"

"you can get to your goals through different routes," "the randomness of a successful career," and "multiple pathways to success."

In response to the question, "Why did you decide to attend more than one session?," three themes emerged: the speakers, diverse experiences, and the intimate storytelling format of the series. Participants often reported returning due to personal connections with the speakers, or interest in learning more about the specific individual's path. One comment noted, "I usually knew the person being interviewed or knew of the person being interviewed and wanted to know how the path they had taken to where they were." Many noted that the diverse experiences of the speakers drew them to return to more sessions, as displayed in the following comment: "I attended more than one session because I was interested in hearing from a variety of speakers with different backgrounds. This allows me to gain specific knowledge from their personal experiences, but also identify overarching themes that apply to successful women in a broad spectrum of career paths." Finally, the intimate, conversational format was frequently identified as a reason for returning: "It was a very safe space to ask questions and to reflect;" "I found the format of these sessions particularly engaging, and the lineup of speakers was diverse and particularly impressive."

Discussion and implications for faculty development

Within faculty development, perhaps the most common approach are cohort based programs that are designed to provide women with leadership skills and a supportive peer environment. These programs are a way to inspire women with the aim to increase the number of women seeking leadership roles in higher education (see for example: Bickel, 2012; Ebbers, Gallisath, Rockel & Coyan, 2000; and Johnson, Flood, Ross, & Wilder, 2010). Often cohort-based programs require significant resources and a considerable commitment from participants.

Given the result of our program evaluation, we conclude that the *Stepping Stones of Successful Women* program may be a promising alternative to time and resource intensive, cohort-based models. Throughout Madsen's (2008) book based on interviews with women university presidents, the author comments about the powerful role of self-reflection in their lives, a skill that they developed early and practiced routinely throughout their development. Examples of quotes from this study's participants include, "'*reflection has been an absolute lifesaver'* and *'reflection can be the most enriching experience if you are willing to deeply acknowledge your own frailties…'"* (p. 11).

Similarly, we have been struck by the self-reflective capabilities of the women we interviewed and the role of self-reflection as a component of professional development. This is similar to other work on the power of narratives (see: Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 2008; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). As demonstrated in our findings, discussing life lessons of successful women is important to stimulate self-reflection among attendees and to empower women to create and embrace their own career paths.

In Seidman's book on interviewing as a qualitative research method, the author writes, "stories are a way of knowing" (2006, p. 7). By interviewing a number of women about their personal and professional career milestones and hearing those narratives, our goals were to generate tangible lessons and demystify career success for current and future generations of women in the academy. Ultimately, the women leaders in our program had strikingly similar lessons to share. The results of our study suggest that attendees gained a deeper understanding of the career paths of successful women, which we hope will encourage more women to aim higher in their own careers.

A recent systemic review of the literature on faculty development designed to promote leadership revealed that multiple strategies appear to be effective. Among the number of programmatic features found to contribute to positive outcomes was the use of reflective practice. The authors thus recommended "the use of alternative practices including narrative approaches" (Steinert, Naismith, & Mann, 2012). Given the results of our program evaluation, the *Stepping Stones of Successful Women* program may be a promising alternative to time and resource intensive cohort-based models.

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