Why can't my colleagues be my close friends?

"I really expected to make friends in my department, especially with women hired at the same time as I was: but everybody is so competitive!"

New women faculty members confront a lot of shocks starting out on their first academic appointments, many of which stem from the discovery that the groves of academe are structured upon covert, emotional norms rather than rational procedures accessible to confused newcomers. As Dorothy Smith puts it, "... in trying to get the women's studies course in place [at the University of British Columbia]...we came up against levels of prejudice, anger, perhaps fear, that overrode commitments (continued on p. 2)
to rational process. Whatever might be the case in other areas, when it came to admitting women to full intellectual and professional equality in the university, the deepest springs of irrationality came to the surface.”* In this case, as in many we are concerned with as the Academic Discrimination advisory board of NWSA, the vulnerability of women faculty was compounded by their dedication to scholarship about women.

The problem is that academia remains a profoundly patriarchal space where, in order to advance, many women faculty have assimilated patriarchal norms, like intense competitiveness with anyone who stands in the way of or might compromise their individual advancement. That is why new women faculty’s corollary assumption, that senior women in their departments will rush to mentor them and that they will form their closest campus friendships among women at their own rank in their departments, is so often painfully ruptured.

There are, of course, ideal enclaves of departmental collegiality out there. Lifelong friendships can be made, but it takes time to sort out where everyone is coming from.

New women faculty might want to assume the worst until a year or two of observation convinces them that they have landed in one of those rare situations where collegiality does not mean conforming to those covert departmental norms it is so hard to tweak out without good mentoring.

So, what to do. On a recent visit to my old campus I ran into women faculty with no balance in their lives at all: they got up early in the morning, went to exercise (alone) in the gym, then to teach, hold office hours, attend committees and do research until 8 or 9 at night, when they came home and went to bed. And these women had tenure!

A Balanced Life

Friendship is much too important in an intellectual’s life to be let go like that: here are some ideas to help you sort things out:

- Exercise is crucial for everyone, but try to do it with others: tennis, aerobic dancing, soccer and baseball teams are good ways to do this.

- Cultivate friendships outside of the campus structure: churches, mosques, and synagogues are great places for mutual support; but groups like birdwatching and hiking clubs work well.

- Partners and spouses are, of course, huge sources of comfort, but friends at your own can let off steam with are crucial to the survival of every relationship.

- On campus, tentatively cultivate acquaintances in other departments. Go to meetings and events where they are likely to be found and ask the ones who appeal to you out for lunch. For the first year, however, you might want to avoid pouring out your heart to them, until your understanding of campus power structures is more refined.

- Last, but by no means least, greet departmental secretaries and staff warmly every morning and treat them with respect and kindness: they will appreciate you for this and provide a welcome bit of warmth to brighten your days in academe.

Be Smart, and Be Selfish When Necessary

by Kay Austen, Academic Discrimination Advisory Board

There is a delusion or a mindset that constantly trips a woman up in all fields of endeavor: the completely mistaken idea that she can succeed on merit alone:

"All I have to do is to be good enough—or better than—or twice as good as men and I will succeed."

NOT! This mindset is excruciatingly naive yet I had it and most women I’ve talked to had it and ruefully acknowledge how much it hindered them. Maybe it comes from being raised to be perfect little girls rather than real people; maybe it’s a defense mechanism, a form of denial or a way of coping. Whatever, it has to go.

It has two contradictory premises: life is unfair, so I’ll work twice as hard as men, and then life will be fair."

Nope, doesn’t work that way. Check the back cover of this newsletter and order copies of “Work smart, not hard: assessing your service commitments” and “Asked to direct? Don’t” if you missed them. They make the point that you need to look hard at what your male cohorts undertake in terms of committee assignments and departmental duties and politely assert your need to keep your service at the same level in order to apply your time to research and publication.

Closely related to this delusion is an even more insidious form of conditioning, the assumption that what really matters is to be a good person. It certainly matters in life, but doesn’t seem to matter at all in the profession.

A note from your editor – so, what to do? Determine the principles you want to live by and act accordingly: just don’t expect to be rewarded professionally for doing so.

Women’s Studies Pioneers Publish Testimony


With sections devoted to

- Naming the Problem
- Overcoming Barriers (Ridicule, Reluctance and Refusals)
- Inventing Successful Strategies (The power of Groups, Planning, and Publicity)
- Providing Feminist Scholarship (For Texts, Teaching, and Other Scholars)
- Building Women’s Studies Programs
- Looking Back,

the collection is full of “click!” moments, those flashes of recognition women experience when sharing our lives with each other. Here are some examples:

“In that mulling, the now obvious had been elusive: that the instruments I used in my study were designed by men, who had also determined the scoring and the meaning of those scores.” Barbara W. Gerber

“We were astounded to see how poorly we were paid in comparison with men with similar - or inferior credentials.”

Mimi Reisel Gladstein.

Sound familiar? Send us your clicks!

The book can be ordered for $22.95 from The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 365 Fifth Ave., New York NY 10016
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