

Cultivating Mentorships for Women in Agricultural Sciences Higher Education Programs

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Women's participation in the agriculture-related fields is among the lowest in comparison to the humanities, education and health (Zselezcky et al., 2013). Even when women are enrolled in agriculture-related academic programs, there are obstacles to retention including lack of mentoring, advising and career counseling as well as outright discrimination.

For women enrolled in agriculture-related programs attending school may entail moving away from family, friends and their support network to unfamiliar places and contexts where norms of behavior and academic expectations are different from what they have experienced potentially causing feelings of alienation, and loss. Higher attrition rates for women have been associated with feelings of isolation, the absence of role models, and unfamiliarity with the competitive climate of academic programs (Chen and Soldner, 2013). Unlike their male counterparts, women often do not have role models or informal networks to acquaint them with life in an academic setting (Morley, 2006). A shortage of role models and lack of mentorship and guidance for women is particularly troublesome in agriculture-related fields long considered to be a male domain. Because scholarly performance and program completion depends on the well-being of students, it is important to provide women with mentorship and a support network to help them thrive.



*Women in science helping women in science in Mali.
Photo: Virginia Tech, OIRED*

The Role of a Mentor

A good mentor is committed to social change, leads by example, uses their achievements to lift and empower others, and provides thoughtful guidance and support of future generations of leaders and scholars. A mentor can have a wide range of roles. In agriculture-related fields, where men dominate administrative positions, program committees, review boards, and professorships, it is of utmost importance for mentors to play supportive roles and work toward making opportunities and social networks available to women. The mentor relationship is a means to encourage successful program completion and the professionalization of women students. In this sense, mentoring includes connecting women students with key people, available resources, and information as well as assisting with academic goal setting and career planning.

Mentoring and Timing: When to Step in?

In terms of fulfilling career aspirations, there are two key moments when mentorship has proven to be a valuable tool for attracting women to pursue careers in agricultural-related fields. The first one is before women even consider applying for a higher education program, and the other is when women are already enrolled in a particular program.

Outreach to primary and secondary students by university administrators and faculty has been identified as an important mechanism to increase access to higher education for marginalized socio-economic groups (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). While educating primary and secondary students about the opportunities associated with pursuing tertiary education is a pivotal first step, it is not enough. Studies have found that to encourage students to enroll in college programs, academic programs need to establish “close, enduring connections that promote positive developmental change” (Rhodes and Dubois, 2008, p. 257).

An example of how these social ties can be strengthened is [Across Ages](#), an intergenerational mentorship program. The program consists of a one year commitment by both youth and mentors, face-to-face meetings on a weekly basis for at least 2 hours, joint community service projects, and regular phone calls (Taylor, LoSciuto & Porcellini, 2005). This social interaction enables mentors and prospective women students to establish trust and build self-confidence. Once strong ties are formed, mentors can start the process of socializing women into the norms and behaviors expected in an academic setting. Mentoring relationships are based on mutual commitment and nurtured across time.

In Ghana, the [Kairos Ladies Network](#), connects girls in their senior year of high school with a mentor in higher education. Mentors in the field of agribusiness make monthly visits to selected schools to motivate girls to consider pursuing advanced studies in agriculture-related fields. Mentors engage in hands on activities and discussions to build trust and self-confidence in young women and to help them envision a future in agriculture-related fields.

Attributes of a Good Mentor

Current and past African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) Fellows describe a good mentor as follows:

- concerned with the fellow’s career aspirations & needs (growth in leadership skills, knowledge, self-confidence, independence & autonomy)
- assertive & well organized
- achiever, trustworthy listener & goal setter
- reliable, inspirational, empathetic, introspective & receptive; motivated & committed
- open & honest; professional & approachable
- share knowledge & professional experiences
- provide supportive sources of encouragement, especially in furthering the aims of female scientists
- provide guidance, advice & constructive criticism
- act as an advisor with a broad scope of guidance
- genuine interest in the fellow’s questions & concerns
- create opportunities for the fellow, open professional doors & share contacts
- partner with the fellow on scientific work & publications
- identify resources
- provide exposure & visibility within an organization
- advise on networking & networking opportunities
- respect confidentiality
- review fellow’s CV & provide job interview tips

Adapted from <http://www.awardfellowships.org/mentors/what-does-a-mentor-do/>

University policy may limit the scope of mentoring by faculty to the academic or professional pursuits of students. Therefore, providing institutional support for the creation of peer mentoring networks is an important step toward ensuring that women have the support necessary to succeed in their programs. For instance to promote women in agriculture-related fields, the [African Women in Agricultural Research and Development](#) (AWARD) encourages experienced fellows to become mentors for incoming awardees. In addition to securing a critical mass of available mentors, the program offers AWARD fellows the opportunity to learn valuable mentorship skills including creating and finding academic and career opportunities, identifying resources, and sharing their experiences. In 2015, AWARD matched 460 fellows from 11 countries with faculty and senior student mentors in their first year of study.

Starting a Mentorship Program

University administrators and faculty need not invest much time or resources to create a successful mentorship program. Within academic departments, a first step is to create a volunteer mentorship committee comprised of faculty and students who are committed to this goal. The mentorship committee can identify areas of work including the creation of partnerships with potential mentors across and outside the university. Former students are also a very important yet often untapped resource. As professionals, former students are employed in a variety of organizations, locally and overseas, and have the potential to provide important resources and support to women students. Creating a forum through which former students can play a mentorship role is an inexpensive and potentially impactful way to foster mentoring relationships. For other ideas on how universities can create successful mentorship programs, click here:

https://oied.ncsu.edu/faculty/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Faculty_Mentoring_Handbook_pdf-1.pdf

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Additional Useful Sources

- [US Office of Personnel Management – Best Practices: Mentoring.](#)
- Big-Brother, Big Sister program guidance on [what the mentor-mentee relationship should involve based on grade level](#)
- [Big Brother, Big Sister Volunteer Training Guide for Mentors](#)

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