

## Down to Earth: informal networking for female geoscientists

Informal mentoring from like-minded peers can be particularly valuable to women in science, according to a paper looking at the growth and success of a network of female geoscientists in the United States.

The Earth Science Women's Network started in 2002, as little more than an email list, after six scientists met at a conference. Today, it has about 2,100 members internationally, and although the online forum is a vital component, the network also organises workshops and meetings at conferences around the world.



Throughout that expansion, the network has retained a member-driven approach. [The paper, written by ESWN members for the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society](#) and available pre-publication, says the group takes an unusual approach “by intentionally not providing structured mentoring partnerships or groups”.

The lack of such a structure is very much the network's strength, says Manda Adams, a programme director at the US National Science Foundation and the lead author of the paper. Formal mentoring programmes “have their place”, she says, but can also have drawbacks for women and minority groups in science.

In particular, Adams says, the informal approach allows for discussion of both professional and personal matters. Family and childcare concerns still weigh heavier on women, she says, but “personal decisions will affect professional decisions and vice versa”, so a holistic approach is necessary.

Added to that, Adams continues, “in more formal mentoring programmes, the mentors may view the mentees as people who are ‘at risk’, as if they need extra help due to some insufficiency”. This can be damaging to women who have already had to battle against unconscious bias and being the “odd one out” during their careers.

Until now, the network has focused on issues faced by early-career researchers—54 per cent of its members are postgraduate students or postdoctoral researchers—but as the membership matures, Adams hopes the benefits of informal mentoring will carry over into senior career development. There is perhaps an even more pressing need for gender parity there: her paper cites a 2015 study showing that only 12 per cent of full professors in atmospheric sciences at US universities are women.

A further advantage of the informal approach is that it can continue through career transitions where a formal system might not. For instance, the network now covers 52 countries, with nearly 400 members from outside North America. This is partly because members have moved away from the US to work in other countries, Adams says. “The network allows for those transitions without an interruption in mentoring.”

*In June of 2015, Research Professional, a source of news, analysis, funding opportunities and jobs for the academic research community, examined the importance of informal networking. The article celebrates ESWN's discussions about professional and personal matters, and the involvement of people around the world at various stages of their careers.*