

GATHERING WOMEN GRADUATE STUDENTS

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I. Introduction

In the Summer of 1990, several women graduate students met to discuss the beginnings of an organization for women in the scientific and engineering graduate programs at Carnegie Mellon University. Almost two years later, this organization has evolved into a decentralized student-run group that holds meetings on a semi-monthly basis. We call the organization Women In Non-traditional Graduate Studies: WINGS. WINGS is an organization that provides a forum for women graduates to discuss and interact on topics of interest to them. In this paper we will describe the structure of WINGS, report on how it evolved and discuss the problems of maintaining such an organization.

Many may question why a student Chapter of the Society of Women Engineers did not meet our needs. At CMU, SWE only addresses the needs of undergraduates in engineering. When WINGS was started it was with the idea of including students beyond the engineering college. One of the premises of WINGS was that graduate students are more focused on their career objectives. The nature of graduate education makes it more difficult to interact with students outside of one's major and thus the isolation of women graduate students is intensified. The secondary objective in starting WINGS was to provide support for women graduate students, however this was not its explicit objective.

II. Defining the Organization:

Rule # 1: Worry about Structure before Funding

We defined what and who we were as an organization before we worried about funding activities. To simply state that we wanted to gather graduate women students in engineering and scientific disciplines would have been too vague. So we spent several meetings discussing the possible goals and objectives of the organization. These goals were refined again after our first year. We provide an information sheet which states the following four objectives:

- To meet other women who are pursuing graduate studies in engineering and science.
- To assist women in understanding and utilizing the system of graduate education.
- To provide a forum for faculty and researchers (women in particular) to advise women graduate students.
- To provide a forum for discussion on issues that are of interest to the group.

In order to accomplish our four goals we chose the mechanism of formal programming organized by topics which we considered to be of special interest to women graduate students. The topics included issues focused on the short term such as the needs

of women graduate students, and the graduate education process and longer term issues such as job focus, career paths and personal issues related to balancing all aspects of one's life.

Rule # 2: Defining your Membership

As its name suggests WINGS is not focused on a particular major or a particular college at Carnegie Mellon. The next obvious question is, "what are considered Non-traditional graduate studies?" We define Non-traditional as meaning under-represented. In addition to graduate students in the engineering college and science college, students in departments in humanities and social science; Statistics, Psychology, Social and Decision Sciences are members, as well as graduate students in Ph.D. programs in our professional schools; the schools of business and public administration.

Because some of our funding is derived from student activity fees our membership does not exclude men. Thus in our information sheet we describe membership as follows:

Membership is open to those individuals who are concerned with the issues related to women graduate students in engineering, science and other non-traditional fields at Carnegie Mellon University.

But in the strict sense of the word WINGS does not have a "membership" as we have no dues, and do not require attendance at meetings (which brings up the misconception that membership implies attendance at almost every meeting). We have targeted the women in graduate programs listed in the previous paragraph for "membership."

Rule # 3: Good Topics will attract an Audience

The fourth objective is fundamental to the success of WINGS. Women need a reason to get together beyond, "this will be an opportunity to meet other women." A diversity of topics have been discussed to service a diverse population of women graduate students. The diversity in population is described by the following characteristics: martial status, year in one's graduate program, feminists vs non-feminists, country of origin. The types of meetings can range from the fun to the serious, from a lecture by one person to a panel discussion. Our topics have included "Finding a Post-Doc," "The Two Body Problem with an Academic Twist," "Handling the Sexism Around You" and "Movie Night."

III. Institutional Support

Once the goals and objectives of the organization were outlined, WINGS was able to make a proposal for support. Having access to a source of funds and office support allowed the students to concentrate on planning meetings and guiding the organization's evolution. We sought such support from two sources: the engineering college Dean's Office and the Graduate Student Organization.

The advice and administrative and financial support of the engineering college Dean's Office helped the graduate students to start WINGS. An early meeting with the Dean of Engineering (then Paul Christiano), resulted in the early conception of the organization. At his suggestion, the authors of this paper first met and discussed possible ideas. The financial support of the Dean's Office and their willingness to handle such administrative matters as the maintenance of mailing lists and copying flyers, etc., allowed the graduate students to concentrate on programming and content. The office support was a low-cost contribution that considerably lightened the burden for the few graduate students who started WINGS.

The Graduate Student Organization (GSO) receives 37% of graduate students' activity fees. These funds are distributed to departments, other graduate student

organizations and to special events. It was natural to request some funding from GSO. The first year we received \$500 to start-up the organization and we did not submit a budget. This past year we submitted a detailed budget for \$790 which was approved for the full amount. As this funding is derived from student activity fees, WINGS could not use these funds for exclusive events. In addition we announce WINGS meetings at GSO meetings and advertise through campus-wide publications. Separate funding is provided for events which are exclusively for women such as a picnic each spring which would just be advertised to only women graduate students, faculty and researchers. We solicited funding from the engineering college Dean's Office for this particular event.

IV. Organizing and Delegating Responsibility

One female graduate student provided the activation energy to start WINGS. Essentially during its first year of existence, one student coordinated the WINGS organization. We recognized the need to distribute the work load. At the end of the first year we discussed adding more structure to the organization. Besides distributing the workload our intention was also to increase our contacts with the various departments that had been targeted for "membership." In this section we would like to describe how WINGS evolved from a female dictatorship to a governance by committee.

Stage 1: How it All Started

With an informal committee of female graduate students and faculty to advise us, we (Anne and Pat) accomplished the following start-up tasks: petitioned GSO for funding, contacted deans of the various colleges, created a campus mailing list, and planned some initial meetings. Publicity consisted of flyers that were sent out through the campus mail and a small electronic mailing list. From this informal committee a few graduate students volunteered to help out with creating the flyers and providing the refreshments. Meetings were planned and announced 2-4 weeks in advance. At the end of the first semester (Fall of 1990) a survey was sent out to the campus mailing list to solicit feedback, ideas for meeting topics and help with the tasks associated with the meetings. In addition, we requested electronic mailing addresses so we could start reminding people of meetings electronically. For Spring of 1991, we proceeded in the same manner using the suggestions for meeting topics.

Stage 2: Time to Regroup

During the Summer of 1991, we discussed the need for restructuring the organization; we needed to add some hierarchy and depth. The goals of our restructuring were: to increase our contact with departments, distribute the workload and responsibility of the organization among several graduate students, and to formalize the roles of faculty and administrators in the organization.

Contact at the department level was increased by appointing WINGS Department Representatives. Department Representatives' responsibilities included putting up meeting flyers, posting to departmental electronic bulletin boards (if they existed), and planning a Fall Kick-off Meeting for their department. We created this position with the busy lives of graduate students in mind, and made every attempt to assure that the time commitment involved would be low. We were not able to find a department representative for every department. In the case of large departments we solicited the help of department heads and faculty. For smaller departments, we invited them to attend another kick-off meeting. Departments used notification techniques tailored to their situation, including: a letter from a female faculty member, department representative or the chair, or WINGS advisory board member, or less personal notification in the form of information added to the folders of incoming students. In addition, in those departments where there is a formal graduate student orientation, WINGS was added to the agenda. Department level awareness was

also increased by sending monthly updates to women faculty, researchers and administrators.

Creating Departmental Representatives helped to distribute the workload of getting the word out about WINGS. We also needed to centralize the planning of meetings. At the suggestion of the engineering college Dean's Office we formed an advisory board which consisted of an administrator, a faculty member and several graduate students. Initially we started off defining the positions of the graduate students along the following lines, Refreshments Coordinator, Publicity Coordinator, Program Coordinator and Campus Representative. We quickly discovered that the Campus Representative position was not as necessary as having another student involved in the programming. Ideally we would like to adapt the Program Coordinator's position along the line of professional societies where they have past president, president and president-elect all sitting on the same board. As stressed earlier, the success of WINGS so far has depended on the quality of the meeting topics. If only one person knows how to organize meetings, then the organization will flounder when that one individual graduates, or suffers from burnout, whichever comes first. As this is an advisory board we preferred descriptive titles as opposed to the usual President, VP, etc. Below is a short description of the responsibilities of each advisory board member:

Faculty Member: schedule advisory board meetings

Admin. Member: provide office support, act as contact with campus bureaucracy

Program Coord: oversee meeting schedule, assure that meetings are planned, handle finances of the organization, send monthly updates to dept reps and faculty

Publicity Coord: oversee flyer production, get publicity into campus publications, maintain e-mail list for meeting reminders

Refreshments Coord: oversee refreshments at meetings, handle the reimbursements

Past & Future Coord: assist with planning meetings

Stage 3: *Problems in the Future*

During the second year of WINGS, we witnessed an increase in meeting attendance and have had more effective communication with the various departments. The Department Representatives were instrumental in increasing awareness and membership. The electronic mailing list has over 75 names. Distribution of the workload to plan meetings among 3 students has made things less hectic. However, passing on responsibility has not been easy. We have adopted the concept of "responsible exit," defined as women attempting to find their own replacements. This has not been as successful as we had hoped; the pressures of graduate school have prevented some women from volunteering their time. Nevertheless, we think that the success of WINGS has been due to the need for a forum for discussion. Hopefully this need will prompt other women graduate students to volunteer. One way to promote involvement by graduate students is to point out that sometime in their career they will most likely have to serve on committees in professional organizations which function similar to WINGS. Practicing these types of skills now can provide exposure and experience which could be valuable later in their career.

V.Meeting Topics

There are a number of things to consider in planing a meeting: when, where, how, and what. Early on we made the conscious decision **not** to have meetings the same day or time of the week. We made this decision in light of different majors having different classes that may conflict with a meeting. In addition this provided scheduling flexibility in obtaining speakers and reserving rooms to hold meetings. We did experiment with different times of the day. From this experimentation we determined that the earliest

appropriate meetings time is 4 pm. The meetings are 90 minutes long with the first 45 minutes scheduled as a planned discussion. The remainder of the time allows for discussion as needed. Refreshments are served at these meetings, as it is well known that graduate students appreciate food.

Finally there is the issue of choosing a topic for a meeting. As discussed earlier we have a diverse population to "serve" and our programming reflects this diversity in the range of topics covered. Initially we planned meetings based on input from women faculty and our own experiences. Early in the planning one woman faculty member expressed her concern that these meetings not turn into "gripe" sessions. She counseled to keep things positive, as she pointed out women are here by choice to study in their chosen profession.

After the first semester, a survey was sent out to all women graduate students to seek their feedback on these meetings. In the survey we asked for suggestions for either speakers or meetings. Responses confirmed that we were covering some of these needs, but also indicated some topics had not been considered. The survey was repeated in the early part of the second year, and the results were useful in planning the meetings for the spring semester.

The meeting topics covered graduate education, gender issues, career focus and personal issues such as balancing work and family. This range of topics was dictated by the needs of a diverse population, and the format of the meetings were developed with the specific topic in mind. In some meetings there was an invited speaker on the topic of interest, e.g. "Science: Stereotypes & Self-Fulfillment." Other meetings consisted of a panel discussion, e.g. "Two Body Problem with an Academic Twist." Other sessions focused on the need for a facilitator to work with attendees on sharing their experiences e.g. "Choosing Your Battles: Handling the Sexism Around You." Finally there were some meetings where the agenda was to have fun - a movie night, or a visit to a clothing store.

During the first year, attendance at meetings ranged from 4 to 12. In the second year the average attendance was up to 15 with the smallest being 8 and a large turnout of over 50 for one meeting (this meeting was the one on the two-career couples). In our opinion increased attendance can be attributed to the addition of Departmental Representatives, better publicity, good topics, and an increase in credibility for the organization.

As previously discussed, WINGS cannot exclude men from meetings, and during the second year we noticed an increase in the number of men attending. This is partially due to the increase in publicity, but may also be attributed to a number of topics offered in the second year that were not gender specific. For example, "The Perfect Candidate" was a discussion on finding an academic position and there were an equal number of men and women in attendance. Also from the attendance at meetings, we noticed that different segments of the targeted population may have different "needs." For instance, at a visit to a clothing store, the majority of the attendees were foreign students. Students closer to completion of their graduate studies were more likely to attend a meeting about future career options.

To summarize, we have found that a diversity of meeting topics and times best serves women graduate students in non-traditional fields. Students have mixed motivations for attending they may be social, related to the topic or to develop an informal network of peers. Meeting attendance has grown from increased publicity and credibility. Also we have observed that some topics attract different segments of the graduate student population. In the future we plan to keep this diversity of programming.

VI. Thoughts on Starting up a Similar Organization

We would like to discuss what factors may affect how a similar organization can be founded at another college campus and discuss what we think are key factors of success.

Obviously the size and cultural diversity of a university will influence how a similar organization would start. For instance, CMU is a small private university, where engineering and science have been very influential in shaping its culture. At a much larger university it may be more feasible to only include women graduate students under one college. The CMU experience indicates that the interdisciplinary nature of the group has been an asset in networking across college and departmental lines.

Regardless of the university or college setting we do think there are a number of factors of success that will be the same. First, by defining your organization's purpose, you have a specific focus in mind. Do not stray from that focus. WINGS has succeeded by remaining focused on meetings with scheduled agendas and planned topics. By remaining focused our credibility has increased. Second, institutional support, whether it is backing from a particular dean or department head or an umbrella student organization, gives you access to funds and other types of support. Third, structure your organization so that it does not depend on one student's drive and devotion. Students graduate and at different phases of their graduate study they may have more or less time to devote to such extra curricula activities.

In our own discussion this past year we have found ourselves uncomfortable with the word "membership," as it conjures up connotations of dues and required attendance. Some women graduate students may feel that regular attendance is a requirement for membership. We have tried to overcome this by sending out messages via the Department Representatives that this is not the case, but continue to receive feedback that indicates that some women graduate students may be uncomfortable with attending only one meeting that is of interest to them.

Depending on your institution's situation, you may want to adapt all or some of the concept of a WINGS organization. You know your institution best. The question you need to ask is, "Are present organizations/functions currently meeting the needs of your women graduate students in science and engineering?" When women graduate students at CMU felt their needs were not being met, they organized WINGS.

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