Allyship in the university setting: supporting women’s success
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Abstract
Purpose – The lack of progress toward equity in the U.S. is evident across many spheres of society, academia notwithstanding. Women academicians, in particular, face many barriers that prevent them from advancing—including a continued unsupportive climate, competing work and family demands, and interpersonal discrimination. This paper reflects on a collaborative research effort in the United States to enhance allyship for women in academia.
Design/methodology/approach – The authors partnered with a major university to hold ally training for department chairs during a university-wide department chair meeting. The authors developed a methodology for creating and implementing training content using a focus-group-based training needs analysis and a diversity science grounded approach to allyship training. The authors followed this up with surveys to assess impact.
Findings – Participants indicated that they learned from the training, but participation in follow-up data collection was limited, hampering the ability to conduct rigorous quantitative analyses around intervention impact.
Research limitations/implications – Although the sample size may have been too limited to detect effects, the current study provides an approach that furthers the way in which researchers and practitioners can better assess the impact of allyship to women academicians.
Practical implications – Published research on allies is very limited. The current research examines allies in the context of helping women in academia.
Originality/value – Despite widespread recognition of the importance of first-line supervisors in support of diversity, limited intervention designs are available. The authors add to the extant literature on diversity interventions, while highlighting barriers to rigorous intervention evaluation.

Keywords Allies, Gender, Higher education, STEM, Training

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Discourse surrounding the glass ceiling (see Cotter et al., 2001; Loden, 1987) sometimes places the burden on women and women alone to break through the invisible barriers blocking their career advancement. Viewed from this traditional perspective, women must be strong enough to break through the barriers that lie ahead of them. However, women did not create the glass ceiling. Why should they be expected to shatter it alone? In this paper, we describe a collaborative initiative developed to challenge this expectation by increasing allyship behavior for academic women as they progress through academic careers. Allies are those who act in solidarity with members of marginalized social groups to advocate for equal treatment and rights (Drury and Kaiser, 2014). Allies are often those who speak from a place of privilege, whether that be privilege associated with organizational status or their social identities. As such, they are uniquely positioned to break the glass ceiling while standing atop it. With this ethos in mind, we describe the motivation behind, conduct of, and lessons learned from a participatory research effort to increase allyship for academic women at a major university in the United States. Women academicians, like women in many other workplaces, face disproportionate levels of career stagnation relative to men (American Association of University Women, no date). We aimed to address this issue through an evidence-based training program on behaviors that can support women’s career advancement in academia.

Women in academia
Women in academia are not progressing at the levels that would be expected if there were no discrimination or other barriers holding women back. Although women make up the majority of non-tenure-track instructors in the United States, they constitute only 36% of full professors (American Association of University Women, no date). The picture is very similar in the United Kingdom, with only 30% of professor positions occupied by women (HESA, 2023). A recent survey of faculty and staff in higher education found that 28% of U.S. women feel that they have been passed over for an opportunity to advance because of their gender, compared to only 11% of men (Marken, 2022). This sentiment suggests that women academics often hit a glass ceiling at some point in their careers—that is, an invisible barrier preventing their rise to more senior positions. One of the challenges that we sought to address was the influential role that women’s colleagues can play in confronting gendered barriers to women’s ascent up the academic career ladder. In doing so, we sought to shift the onus of improving gender equity in academia away from women themselves and onto Allies, who are colleagues that act in solidarity with academic women.

Although individuals ultimately enact allyship behaviors, organization-level influences are also important in facilitating these behaviors. For instance, organizational leaders can create, support and enforce policies that ensure gender-biased behavior is not tolerated, women are safe to express their opinions, and all employees feel a shared sense of responsibility for fair and equitable career advancement. Individual employees and organizational decision-makers must work in tandem to make meaningful changes to policy that support gender equity, such as support for pay equity, flexible work arrangements and leave policies. These changes not only ensure that women enter academic jobs but also that once they do, they are able to meaningfully grow their careers. Improving women’s representation at all levels of higher education, from assistant professors to university administrators, is a win-win for both women faculty and students. Research shows that women who see people like them represented in positions that have historically been dominated by men can encourage them to pursue those positions as well (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004). As such, the focus of our collaborative research initiative was narrowly tailored to increase allyship behaviors supporting women academics. In doing so, we believe that others will better recognize and help extinguish the challenges and biases that women academics face as they are trying to advance in their jobs.
Collaborative approach

Our intervention was a collaborative research effort with top management at our partner university (e.g. the provost, the associate provost for recruitment and retention). The intervention was informed by data collected from our partner university’s National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded ADVANCE initiative. The ADVANCE initiative supports universities in creating structural changes and mechanisms to support gender equality in academic science and engineering roles. The research team was informed that the university had a particular problem in that women faculty were advancing from Associate Professor to Full Professor at much lower rates than men. Many women never pursued promotion to Full Professor at all, even though their research productivity, teaching, and service records were comparable to men who had been successfully promoted to Full Professor. Overall, 81% of the Full Professors at our partner institution were men and only 19% were women. This resulted in a lack of representation of women on university committees and in leadership roles that require Full Professorship to be eligible for service. Additionally, an ADVANCE climate survey conducted at the university revealed that women and faculty of color reported significantly lower levels of support and less favorable climate than men and White faculty. The stakeholders agreed that it was necessary to proactively address these challenges to meet the students’ needs.

Our team established a research partnership with the university, and established relationships with the university provost, associate provost for faculty affairs and other senior administrators, resulting in critical leadership support for our initiative. The steps involved in developing the goals and approach to the allyship training initiative are depicted in Figure 1.

Following preliminary qualitative research with women about their experiences in the institution, we identified a need for training on how to support and advance women and gender equity. Leadership commitment to our training and the development of allyship behaviors was communicated to department chairs through several mechanisms. First, the associate provost sent the invitations for the training and allocated committed time to university-wide chairs meetings for the training. Second, the associate provost for faculty affairs was present at the training sessions and explained to participants the program’s criticality for institutional progress toward a more inclusive institutional culture in support of the university’s diverse student body. The associate provost for faculty affairs also told participating department chairs they would learn about (a) the need for and importance of gender allies; (b) specific behaviors that support women and particularly women of color faculty in departments; and (c) the importance of leadership encouragement to faculty participation.

Third, the provost signaled top management buy-in by sending a memo and informing all deans that chairs were invited to take part in the workshop and that the deans should encourage chairs to attend the workshops. In her messages, the provost asked deans to reflect on the importance of the workshop in alignment with equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) goals by asking them for their support, specifically asking: (a) Will you help us proactively address these challenges so we can meet our students’ needs?; (b) Will you help us nurture a climate that will ensure everyone’s perspectives are integrated to generate the best possible research and innovation outcomes for our institution?; and (c) Can I count on you to communicate the importance of these workshops to your faculty?

Our partner university’s internal team members conducted preliminary qualitative research (i.e. focus group sessions) to gather data from women professors involved in the ADVANCE initiative on supportive and unsupportive behaviors they had encountered. The data were coded into categories to inform the skills-based component of the training (i.e. to teach gender allies the skills needed to execute behaviors that positively impact women faculty). The training was designed to address barriers to participation in EDI efforts in the
Figure 1. Steps involved in developing gender allyship training.

- **Preliminary qualitative research**
  - Women faculty asked about effective ally behavior from men as well as behaviors that signaled a lack of allyship

- **Content development**
  - Developed content based on behaviors identified in prelim qualitative research and on existing literature

- **Testing**
  - Feedback sessions on workshop content with Provost & ADVANCE advocates
  - 2 Pilot Test workshops: ADVANCE advocates, "Devil's Advocates"

- **Provost comms to Deans**
  - Provost email to Deans inviting them to Department Chair workshop and asking them to encourage Department Chairs to attend

- **Department Chair workshop**
  - Held during regular Chair's Council Meeting
  - Department Chairs asked to encourage their faculty to attend upcoming faculty workshops

- **Faculty workshops**
  - Multiple workshops available; some workshops were open to all genders and some were for men only

Source(s): Figure by authors
workplace. To do this, we focused on education about the underrepresentation of women and people of color in academia and its negative impacts. Most importantly, we provided clear behaviors and actions individuals can take to support EDI, including information about how these actions will help. The goal was to create a training that felt very positive and assumed all attendees start with an equity mindset.

Using the ALLIES acronym (see Figure 2), these skills included (1) “A” representing access and opportunities, which involves focusing on women colleagues and asking them for input, recognizing their accomplishments, amplifying their ideas and achievements, interrupting interrupters and/or nominating them for awards. These behaviors help women colleagues be seen and heard. (2) “LL” stands for Listen and Learn, which suggests noticing the gender makeup (be it of collaborators, panelists, committee members or leaders), focusing on learning about the experiences of women academicians, attending diversity training and other similar events, learning about the challenges women colleagues face and just listening. These behaviors prevent women colleagues from being overtaxed with educating others. (3) “I” stands for Inclusion and Collaboration, which asks individuals to collaborate with, attend presentations of, mentor or sponsor, share information with, invite to social outings, and/or give honest feedback to women colleagues. These behaviors offer inclusion and collaborative opportunities for women colleagues, increased social support, and access to broader formal and informal networks. (4) “E” stands for Encourage Balance, which suggests supporting and modeling balance between work and personal life. These behaviors include being mindful of formal activity times, knowing about and using family-friendly policies, and/or letting women themselves decide if they are too busy to take on new, more challenging, or additional assignments. These behaviors help mitigate work-family conflict, prevent penalties for using policies when men academicians do not, and prevent women academicians from being “protected” from challenging work. (5) “S” stands for share, suggesting that one shares what they have learned with other colleagues. This may include articulating to others the value of diversity, educating others about challenges to equal opportunities, volunteering for committees to advance EDI, and demonstrating authentic and consistent commitment to diversity in front of (and when not in front of) other colleagues.

We custom-built the training based on the ALLIES framework and on aspects of existing ally training models that have gained support in the LGBTQ community (Madera et al., 2013). In particular, we used social psychological research on goal setting and implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999) to develop skills-based training with theoretical support. We also tried to respond to many of the issues that women in academia face (see Gruber et al., 2020).

**Figure 2.** Allies training model

Source(s): Figure by authors
The training was delivered in-person over a 90-min period by Dr. Mikki Hebl of Rice University. Based on our review of existing ally programs and Dr Hebl’s work with executive MBA students (see Hebl and King, n.d, in press), we built a workshop around four major components: (1) the underrepresentation of women, particularly women of color, in the academy, (2) the value of gender equity, (3) the need for and value of gender allies and (4) education on gender bias and the behaviors that support women and women of color faculty using the ALLIES framework developed from the initial focus groups. Training that combines both behavioral and awareness-based information has been shown to be more effective than awareness-based training alone in EDI training context (Bezrukova et al., 2016).

Figure 3 depicts the major components of the training session for department leaders.

To ensure that our training materials were comprehensive, digestible and impactful, we fine-tuned them through feedback from advocates and project management team members. Figure 3 shows the training course components and delivery details. We ran two pilot sessions with ADVANCE team members, friends of these team members, and friends who were asked to play the role of devil’s advocate. After tweaking the materials, the workshop session was presented at the Chair’s Council Meeting, which is a mandatory meeting attended by university department chairs, associate deans and some program directors (N = 31). The sample was 74% men, and 71% White, 26% Asian and 6% Black. Most attendees were full professors (65%), 33% were associate professors and 3% were faculty directors.

We asked all attendees to develop personal goals for promoting gender diversity, equity and understanding in their individual departments. We explained that personalized goal-setting was a tool that individuals use to set goals about changes they would like to meet and although it was individualized, they should set SMART goals (see Doran, 1981); goals that were specific, measurable, achievable, relevant to oneself and one’s department and time-bound. We gave attendees a number of examples of goals they could choose (e.g. invite women faculty to informal events, intervene when women faculty are interrupted, collaborate...
with women faculty on research/grants, nominate women for speaking roles and/or awards, attend a future diversity training, read articles about diversity in academia) but asked them to set their own.

Outcomes
We inferred the impact of our training from three data sources. First, we gathered survey-based posttraining evaluation and reactions data. Not all of the initial 31 attendees responded to the evaluation survey. Chair attendees that did respond to the post-training survey (N = 26) indicated their level of agreement with seven statements on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree” (see Figure 4). The pattern of responses suggests that chair attendees had a largely positive evaluation of the training experience.

Second, to measure impact beyond reactions, which tend to show modest relationships with behavior change (Blume et al., 2010; Sitzmann et al., 2008), we further requested that the Chair attendees develop and describe allyship goals and behavioral intentions. This approach is grounded in prior evidence suggesting that behavioral intentions and goal setting are more proximate correlates of actual behaviors than training reactions and satisfaction (Conner and Norman, 2022). All of the Chair attendees wrote responses to a prompt that asked them to specify their allyship goals and behavioral intentions (see Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, chair attendees provided thoughtful responses, and many of the responses were derived from content presented in the training, providing some evidence of attention and learning.

Third, we utilized climate survey data collected by our partner institution (as part of the larger, multiyear ADVANCE initiative) to determine whether, how and when women faculty’s perceptions of climate and support were linked to their department chair’s participation in the ALLIES intervention. This included faculty members’ ratings of (a) affective commitment, (b) mentoring, (c) coworker support, (d) leadership, (e) harassment,
1. Ensure that applicant pools include women and women of color. 2. Show certain faculty (males) they must mentor women. 3. Continue to be an advocate for diversity.

Recruitment – develop ways to increase the diversity of faculty applicant pools. Find ways to normalize the letters of rec from applicants with respect to implicit bias. Normalize expectations of applicant qualifications. See through the bias in search committees. 2. Service work must be fairly distributed; NO token members of committees. 3. Student Mentoring (shared experiences) – organize connections between folks with shared challenges (e.g. 1st in college/grad school)

1. Meet w/all-women assoc. Professors individually regarding their plans/strategies for promotion to full professor (I did this before – will do again) 2. Promote opportunities for collaboration for my women faculty (wk w/DOR & our Assoc Dean for res. To ID opportunities. 3. Individual appointments w/women asst. Profs. To discuss research.

Table 1. Chair attendees’ goals for enacting the ALLIES framework

| Source(s): Table by authors |
incivility and (g) inclusion. Specifically, we assessed the correlation between chairs’ participation in the ally training (versus no participation) and their constituent faculty members’ evaluations of these experiences (aggregated to the level of the department). The group of chairs who did not attend the training were used as a quasi-experimental control group because the training was mandatory. As a result, those not in attendance were absent due to conflicting obligations, rather than simply a lack of interest in the training. In other words, our data reflect a quasi-experimental design containing a treatment and control group. However, there were no meaningful correlations been training participation and the variables of interest ($r’s < 0.10$).

We also attempted to analyze change over time as a function of chair attendees’ participation in the training program. We ran several within-department analyses of variance with chair attendees’ participation in training as a predictor of change for all of the measures collected through ADVANCE both prior to and following training. Although there was evidence of positive change in some variables over time in the ADVANCE data (i.e. chair attendees’ ratings on some variables, including voice, incivility, citizenship behaviors and diversity climate improved over time), there were no significant time by training attendance interactions or main effects for chair attendance. To be comprehensive, we also ran regression models at the department level looking at how chair attendance (and also whether or not the Chairs set goals) predicted outcomes on the post-training variables (controlling for pretraining scores). Neither chairs’ attendance nor engagement in goal-setting had any significant effect.

The biggest challenges for our measurement approach were related to statistical power. With only 26 chairs participating in the post-training survey, the sample sizes were quite small and the generalizability of the findings may be limited. In addition, climate survey participation was less than 50% for the climate survey iterations, with different individuals participating at different time points. There were also substantial amounts of missing data within individual respondents’ surveys; as much as 60% of items were skipped even when participants began surveys. As a result, the total sample we analyzed to examine changes across multiple time points may have been underpowered to draw meaningful conclusions based on repeated measures analyses. Although our most rigorous attempts to measure impact through more distal perceptions of changes in climate and perceived support (which would have been mediated by behavior change and faculty perceptions of change) ended up unsuccessful, the sample sizes may just have been too small to detect impact.

However, it is still important to note that goal setting and the development of behavioral intentions to serve as an ally for women and faculty of color colleagues are meaningful and (based on prior research; Madera et al., 2013) likely to be linked to behavior change. Indeed, Figure 4 shows that chair attendees, as a whole, indicated a very strong intention ($M = 6$) to meet the personalized goals they set. It is possible that we needed to be clearer on institutionalized ways in which they should go about meeting these set goals. That is, when we asked chair attendees to indicate how they would inspire others to attend ally skill-building workshops, they gave a wide range of responses such as “they won’t need much encouragement,” “coordinate ciphers to begin conversation,” “transfer workshop knowledge NOT formally but over beer,” “circulate articles,” “promote them in meetings” and “start a ‘come-with-me’ campaign.” It is clear from the variety of these responses that not only is it important to set SMART goals but that the follow-up of influencing others must also be SMART.

Discussion
Our underlying assumptions in intervention development were centered on the needs articulated by our target beneficiary group: women. Our focus group and qualitative
survey-based research on what constitutes supportive (and unsupportive) ally behaviors informed our needs analysis approach and served as the foundation of our impact measurement. We think that one of the biggest takeaways of the current paper is to base ally training for women on increasing the helpful and decreasing the unhelpful behaviors that are articulated by women themselves. It is also important to consider the academic experience of non-U.S.-based women academicians as well as the many intersectional identities (e.g. with race, age, rank, and immigration status) of these women when asking them about and training others on allyship behaviors.

Ultimately, the long-term impact of our intervention on women is unknown. However, the training needs analysis that informed our understanding of the needs of women faculty motivated institutional policy changes at our partner institution. For example, the partner institution, informed by our analyses, changed family-supportive policies, including dual career policies, parental leave policies, and a backup care policy allowing faculty to use institutional resources to care for dependents. Our data also suggests that the percentage of women seeking promotion increased dramatically during the year of the ally intervention (from less than 15% of women to around 45% in a given promotion cycle). Still, we cannot draw any causal conclusions from this data. Further, we did not find convincing evidence that the chair attendees’ participation in the training program contributed to a change in their allyship behaviors over time. This could be due to the low sample size and low participation in the climate survey or to the duration of the time lag in outcome data measurement (nearly a year after the intervention). These issues could potentially be mitigated in the future by holding multiple training sessions and implementing allyship initiatives to provide accountability and opportunities to practice over time.

Conducting multiple sessions of allyship training may have been beneficial for long-term learning and implementation. Research suggests that multiple training sessions (compared to a single training session) tend to create a better transfer of skills from training to the workplace (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Though the one 90-min session, we held proved to be meaningful based on the responses from the chairs, to meet our goal of long-term retention, implementation of skills and advancement of women in academia, multiple sessions spread out over time might aid in maintaining motivation to transfer and preventing knowledge decay. By having multiple sessions, trainees could keep track of the goals they set and how well they are fulfilling them. This may be difficult from a practical implementation standpoint, as chairs’ busy schedules are already quite full. Regardless, holding more than one allyship session could increase learning and implementation of allyship behaviors to further lift the burden off the shoulders of women and women of color. It is further important to note as we are trying to ascend women through the glass ceiling, that we do not settle for placing them in precarious leadership roles that are unlikely to be successful, a phenomenon known as the glass cliff (see Ryan and Haslam, 2005).

The implementation of allyship initiatives (e.g. establishing a mentorship program) alongside allyship training could also provide men faculty more opportunities to practice what they learned and set out to do. Many of these initiatives could further be combined with other initiatives adopted by progressive organizations (see Loden, 1987). Allyship initiatives can serve as a time for the transfer of training to occur and allow trainees to implement the allyship skills they learned in the intervention in their workplace. A meta-analysis from Bezrukova et al. (2016) on diversity training found that when training is paired with initiatives (vs. standalone), affective and behavioral learning tends to be improved. Incorporating opportunities for trainees to see through the goals they set for themselves is a promising way to advance women in the academy.

Although we recommend holding multiple allyship training sessions to create a long-lasting impact and opportunities to practice trained skills, it was evident from the trainees’ goals that participants gleaned some awareness of allyship against sexism in academia,
particularly when it comes to easing the burden of addressing sexism that has historically fallen on women. By bringing autonomy to participants and allowing them to set their own allyship goals, they are more likely to follow through with them in the future (Madera et al., 2013). Many trainees set goals to encourage fellow men colleagues to participate in diversity training and learn about the importance of allyship to support and promote women academicians. A goal such as this is likely to come to fruition with the accountability that follow-up training and initiatives provide.

Nevertheless, the ADVANCE initiative has demonstrated its potential to create changes in the systems that have held women academicians back in their careers. These are the same systems that have reinforced the glass ceiling over women, and it is now time for men to support their fight in shattering it. As demonstrated in the ADVANCE initiative, obtaining Chair buy-in through allyship training could be an effective starting point in the advancement of women in academia.

Note

1. We aim to be as gender inclusive as possible, and while we are focusing on women in this paper, we recognize a need to broadly address needs of individuals with gender identities other than men/women, and also acknowledge the importance of further examining the intersection of gender with other social identities in organizational settings.

References


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