Women's work: Women leading women in a teaching-focussed first year college

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Abstract

In 2018, a community of practice initiative was introduced to enhance the career opportunities for the 53 women academics in the First Year College (FYC) at Victoria University. The FYC is a teaching-oriented college and thus the traditional career advancement through research is largely not applicable to women in the college – many of whom are teaching-focussed academics. The Women in First Year (WiFY) executive developed and implemented workshops with the aim of aiding women on their career trajectory and in getting more women to senior levels and into leadership positions. In this article we will argue that the WiFY initiative has resulted in greater career achievements for women in the FYC. Using data collected from semi-structured interviews as well as relevant research and FYC statistics on career progression, we will argue that WiFY has had a positive effect on the career trajectory of women in the FYC who have participated in their workshops.

Practitioner Notes

1. Addresses the need for a women's led community of practice to support women's career trajectory in academia
2. Highlights the benefits of such an initiative for women in a first year, teaching-focussed college
3. Demonstrates that there are clear pathways within teaching and learning colleges for female teaching-focussed academics
4. Builds upon the wealth of scholarship that exists within the international community regarding a paucity of women in senior positions in academia
5. Utilises an inter-disciplinary, mixed-methods thematic analysis approach to interpreting data based on interviews provided by female academics.

Keywords

women, leadership, professional development, teaching and learning.

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Introduction

This paper will highlight the Women in First Year (WiFY) initiative that was developed to support women in the multi-disciplinary First Year College (FYC) at Victoria University (VU), Melbourne Australia, with a specific focus on teaching and learning. The WiFY initiative emerged from discussions amongst women in the FYC leadership group, to support and empower women academics within the College. Women's networks have been found to lead to a growth in self-confidence and in the pursuit of higher positions (McCarthy, 2004). Meetings can provide a safe haven where personal connections can be created through the sharing of experiences (Colemon, 2010) and professionally, the sharing of networks offers personal connection and the opportunity for growth and collaboration (Pennamon, 2019). In addition, building a professional community can enhance productivity and result in the production of more meaningful work. When these communities are multidisciplinary, as occurs in the FYC, the opportunity to enrich one's professional practice broadens (Nester, 2016). By supporting women wanting to apply for promotion and research fellowships, and facilitating inter- and multi-disciplinary research, WiFY is fostering a collegial and supportive environment to improve the research and teaching nexus and in turn contribute richly to the University and the success of the women in the College. Importantly, the WiFY initiative has maintained a focus on supporting women academics to seek out leadership opportunities - actively negating the 'leaky pipeline' prevalent in higher education institutions in Australia. This leaky pipeline, a term coined in 1999, describes the way in which women in academia do not ascend to positions of leadership in the same way as their male peers do (Wurster, 2017). As Parker et al. (2018, p.5) write, 'the increase in female participation in higher education has not changed women's academic representation at senior levels in universities in Australia, which is similar to that in other Western countries'. Through sessions tailored for women academics on themes such as promotion, research, mentoring and networking, WiFY aims to stem the leaky pipeline within the FYC.

Formation of Women in First Year

The formation of WiFY occurred at the end of the inaugural year of the FYC. The development of a dedicated, multi-disciplinary, teaching-focused College grew out of a long-standing commitment within the University to improve the first-year experience, transition and retention. During the creation of the FYC, applications to join the College were invited from permanent and casual staff within the discipline-based colleges across the university, for new teaching only and teaching and research positions, focussed upon a commitment to student success in first year, teaching innovation, and teaching excellence. As the College was newly created, and had drawn staff from all disciplines, as well as those new to the university, many of the academics appointed to the FYC had not previously worked together. This provided a unique opportunity for the formation and establishment of new networks, groups and communities of practice within the College. Within the FYC there are approximately 100 permanent academics. Currently there are 43 female academics and of those, 29 are in teaching-focussed positions and mostly early in their academic career, while the remaining 14 are in teaching and research positions and mostly mid-career.

WiFY emerged late in 2018, developing organically out of conversations that were being had in the College, and becoming more formalised as women who had previously demonstrated their ability to lead groups of women academics were invited to join the WiFY Executive. Since its inception, the WiFY Executive have developed and hosted numerous events and workshops that are open to all individuals who identified as women or non-binary in the FYC. Individuals are informed of these events at regular College meetings and via a specific email list that includes all women academics in the College. These events have ranged from social lunches that aimed to build community and

discuss the unique goals and barriers faced by women in a teaching-focussed College, to more formal professional development workshops that have focussed on leadership, enhancing the capacity of staff and assisting with research and career progression. The more formalised events are hosted during mid-semester breaks and non-teaching periods to be accessible to most staff. Attendance on average is between 20-50% of women in the College, with specific workshops (such as those related to research fellowships) having lower numbers, while broader social or planning events returning higher attendance rates. Currently the WiFY Executive hosts events approximately 6-8 times a year with plans to increase this in the coming years (particularly with the return to campus following the COVID-19 pandemic). Alongside formal events and workshops the WiFY Executive have encouraged a sense of supportive community where informal conversations, mentorships and collaborations have been fostered.

By developing workshops and events aimed at women academics, the WiFY Executive has created a programme of events designed to help teaching-focussed women academics to advance in their career aspirations. In this way WiFY aims to stem the leaky academic pipeline and mitigate the factors that women usually face in ascending the academic ladder. It is also important to note that the WiFY Executive comprises teaching and research academics at all levels of their careers. Within the WiFY Executive, the women receive mentoring from more senior academics and model leadership to other women in the College. Critically, the leadership roles held by women in the WiFY Executive range from structured and formal roles within the FYC (such as Head of Scholarship & Professional Learning and Head of Community Engagement) and other roles within the University, including Research Discipline Leaders to members of the various Ethics Committees.

WiFY as a community of practice

In many ways, WiFY has emerged and functions as a "bottom up", non-hierarchical community of practice (CoP) for supportive professional development for women within the College. The term "community of practice" has become widely used within academic settings. First outlined in Lave and Wenger's 1991 study of apprenticeships, the concept explores the way the apprentice's acquisition of knowledge, skills and identity does not result simply from the master-apprentice dyad, but rather arises within complex and extended networks of knowledge-sharing and co-creation, within a wider community of practitioners in the field (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Aligned with social constructivist approaches to learning, the concept of CoP acknowledges the complex, social, networked and interconnected ways in which learning and professional practice and development occur. Bickle et al (2021) suggest that benefits for CoP members are enhanced when group formation is democratised, non-hierarchical and bottom up, rather than created by management (Bickle et al., 2021, p.138). Similarly, they argue that CoP are more effective when participation is intrinsically motivated by the desire to share and co-create knowledge, rather than extrinsically motivated by external academic goals of personal advancement and publication (Bickle et al., 2021, p.138). Since its inception, WiFY has been underpinned by a commitment to creating a non-hierarchical community of practice, fostering a space for FYC women to share knowledge, insights, and experiences, and discover that they are not alone in the difficulties they face as women in academia.

Barriers and challenges for women academics in teaching-focussed settings

A key focus of WiFY has been the notion of women leading and empowering women so that they are more equipped to challenge the systemic barriers present in academia. Issues that have traditionally faced women academics range from sexism, stereotypes, unconscious bias, and work-

family responsibilities (Parker et al., 2018). In her exploration of the obstacles for women academics, Savigny (2014) uses the term 'cultural sexism; the significant, invisible, normalising barrier to women's progression within the academy' (p. 795). Another salient issue and one worth mentioning is that women in a teaching-focussed College face a specific set of difficulties. Research consistently demonstrates that within the higher education sector, teaching performance has not been accorded the same status as research performance (Probert, 2012; Probert, 2014; Whitton, Parr and Choate, 2014). At the same time, women academics have tended to be clustered in the lower, teaching-heavy ranks of academic career structures (MacKinlay, 2016; McKenzie, 2017; Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017; Parker, 2018). Given the over-representation of women at lower academic levels and in positions that also tend to take up a disproportionate level of teaching, how teaching within university contexts is experienced becomes critical for feminism and gender equity. The teaching of lower year level, and commencing students in particular, has been associated with care work, the supportive and nurturing "women's work" of the academy (McLeod, 2017). In recent years, this situation has been potentially exacerbated by the emergence of teaching-focussed academic positions. Of particular concern is that structural and cultural disadvantages already facing women academics will be intensified as they intersect with the structural and cultural disadvantages associated with the devaluing of the care work of teaching. In the context of a dedicated teaching-centred College, with most women academics employed in teaching-focussed positions, in conditions wherein 'the care work of teaching [is] both romanticised and devalued – materially and symbolically: women care, men lead' (McLeod, 2017, p.46), there is clear value for a women-led initiative to support and empower women teaching academics in career progression and leadership. This case study project has considered the question of whether, and how, a women-led Executive group can support teaching-focussed women academics to overcome the potential barriers, challenges and disadvantages they face in the context of neoliberal higher education.

Teaching focussed positions: an international trend

Recent decades have seen the emergence of teaching-focussed or teaching-only positions across the entire higher education sector in Australia, as well as internationally (Whitton, 2014; Probert, 2013; Probert, 2014; Probert and Sachs, 2015). Probert (2013) links the rise of teaching-focussed or teaching-intensive academic positions in Australia with a wider international trend associated with mass participation, technological innovation, increasing competition and financial pressure on universities. Associated with the impact of neoliberalism, widening participation, and technological change, this development has seen the "unbundling" or splitting of elements of academic work into distinct and more specialist roles, including academic skills support, content and curriculum design, technological development (Probert 2014). In a development described as "more opportunistic than strategic", these changes, Probert writes, have been motivated by "quite different and contradictory reasons", ranging from the "explicit desire to raise the status of teaching and develop teaching-focussed career paths" to "the desire to improve institutional research rankings by transferring research-inactive staff to a teaching-focussed classification" (Probert, 2013, p.2).

In an Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching report, Probert outlines the historical context of this development, arguing that the "traditional" privileging of research over teaching is in fact quite recent for many of Australia's newer universities. In Australia, the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s ushered in a period of widening participation in university attendance. Former Colleges of Advanced Education and Institutes of Technology were incorporated into the newly unified higher education system, ending the previous two-tiered system, and almost doubling the number of Australian universities (Probert, 2013; Probert, 2014). In this context, the new universities were required to demonstrate, and defend, their university status by undertaking research, increase the research qualifications and output of their staff, and compete for research

funding. University status, performance and competitiveness, and the status and performance of individual academics, became tied to research achievement (Probert, 2014).

Against this historical background, teaching-focussed roles are potentially associated with a failure to achieve full researcher, thus full academic, status. As Probert writes "after years of research focus, many continue to doubt that you can have a good university career based on teaching, or that a teaching position will be given the same respect as a researcher. Teaching is still widely talked about as a kind of punishment for not being a competitive researcher." (2014, n.p.). The move into a teaching-focussed position can potentially be seen as a one-way street (Probert, 2013; Probert, 2014), leading to a dead-end, or second-rate career (Whitton et al., 2014). Given this, many within the sector are wary of the emergence of teaching-focussed roles leading to the creation of an academic under-class (Whitton et al., 2014; Probert, 2013; Probert, 2014; Probert and Sachs, 2015).

Widening participation, student diversity, and teaching excellence

The emergence of teaching-focussed academic roles has also been linked to the genuine desire within universities to improve the student experience, and foster effective student support, transition, retention and success. The context of widening participation in higher education has meant greater student diversity, not only in terms of social, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, but also in terms of preparedness for university study (Jehangir, 2009; Fletcher, 2014). With increased student diversity, issues of effective student integration, inclusion, engagement, retention, and transition have become increasingly important (Devlin and McKay 2011; Funston, 2014). The significant and growing literature in the First Year Experience (FYE) and equity fields has shown that so called non-traditional and equity category students can achieve at a level comparable to their peers if they are effectively supported, particularly in their first year of studies (Devlin et al., 2012; James et al., 2010; Kift, 2009; Funston, 2014; Gale, 2009). This work has highlighted the need for higher quality teaching, particularly at the first-year level. Raising the status of teaching means also raising the status of the "care work" of supporting diverse students. In this work, critical and feminist pedagogies can be employed to contest normative structures, to include, motivate and engage diverse students, and thus support higher education's aims of equity and inclusion (Fletcher, 2014; Gale, 2009; Gee, 1995; Giroux, 2011; Hook, 2019; Jehangir, 2009; Kift, 2009; Leach, 2013; Leathwood, 2003; McInnes, 2003; Twaites and Pressland, 2017). In these contexts, the 'unbundling' of academic work can be seen as an increasingly specialised and professionalised approach to university teaching, as evidenced by the growth in tertiary teaching qualifications and the emergence of the teaching-focussed career path (Probert, 2014).

Teaching-focussed roles in first year: specialisation, professionalisation or marginalisation?

In some higher education settings, such as VU's FYC, teaching-focussed positions have been introduced as part of wider strategies to improve the student experience, transition to university, and improve student retention, particularly in relation to first year. Probert (2012; 2014) has found that in settings where teaching excellence is recognised and rewarded, both staff and students can benefit. Probert argues that effective university leadership is vital to prevent teaching-focussed academic roles from becoming disadvantaged and marginalised. She writes "teaching-focussed appointments can raise the status of teaching or continue its marginalisation. What happens next will depend on the strategy and values of senior management, and the extent to which these are reflected in the things that deans and heads of department do and say" (2014, n.p.).

At VU, the establishment of the FYC has been significantly underpinned by the aim of raising the status of teaching and improving student experience. The formation of the FYC saw large numbers

of women employed in entry level (level A or B) Academic Teaching Scholar (ATS) positions, and much smaller numbers of Level B and C women employed in Academic Teaching and Research (ATR) positions. Initially there was also a significant imbalance of male academics in senior and leadership positions. In this context, teaching heavy workloads, large numbers of early career female academics, and the tendency for women to take up or become responsible for the "academic housework" of the College, meant that there was considerable potential for marginalisation and disadvantage. On the plus side, a supportive Dean, and a 'flat" and 'dispersed' College leadership structure has served to foster collegiality, collaboration, and the development of a democratic ethos. At the same time, a College-wide orientation to innovation and excellence in teaching and learning has supported teaching, and provided structures for promotion and career recognition based on teaching innovation and excellence. These elements have created a situation where it has been possible to invert the traditional research-teaching hierarchy and re-centre, rather than marginalise, teaching excellence in career progression and leadership. The formation of WiFY has sought to bring women to the centre of this work, and by utilising a feminist, bottom-up approach, drive change within the College, through empowering and supporting teaching-focussed women staff in supercharging their academic achievements and progression. This study investigates the impact and outcomes of this work.

Methods

This study utilises a mixed-methods approach which is indicative of the interdisciplinary nature of the academics who make up the WiFY Executive. The research methodology is an inductive, critical realist approach to thematic analysis - particular in the data collected from interviews. Thematic analysis has emerged as one of the most valuable interdisciplinary approaches to qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2006, Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) and is particularly pertinent to research which uses anecdotes (in this case semi-structured interviews) to bolster theoretically based claims. As Kiger and Varpio (2020, p.846) have argued, 'thematic analysis can stand alone as an analytic method and be seen as foundational for other qualitative research methods'. In this paper we have used an inductive approach, by specifically targeting women in the FYC who we know have benefitted from WiFY's activities in the College. This is wholly supported by both the theoretical material, which describes the importance of women-focussed initiatives and their benefits for women academics, as well as by the data that WiFY has collected in regard to the career progression of women academics within the FYC. This includes more women than men being promoted to Levels B, C and D in the College, a 100% success rate for women applying for competitive Special Studies Programs (SSP) and a 50% increase in women receiving Research Fellowships from 2018 to 2019, affording them time-release to pursue research. This paper aims to understand what it was about WiFY interventions that had contributed to the women's success. In 2021, ethics approval was sought and granted to conduct a pilot investigation that began with interviews with women in the FYC who felt that WiFY had enabled their career progression. A call was put out to the FYC women staff (of which there are approximately 40, not including administration staff and WiFY Executive members) and three FYC women responded. These women were asked to be part of a pilot evaluation of the WiFY program, with the view to a larger more expansive evaluation taking place in the year ahead. Three of the WiFY Executive volunteered to be the interviewers and a set of semi-structured (or open-ended) interview questions were devised. These were:

1. What is your basic demographic information and position (gender identity, academic level when hired, current academic level, nature of academic contract and are you an ATS or an ATR?
2. How have you engaged with WiFY activities? Have you attended any WiFY events? If so, which ones and why?
3. Have you found this engagement to be helpful to you? In what kinds of ways?

4. Do you feel that any WiFY events have aided you in planning or achieving career objectives? Can you describe these?
5. What have you gained from your engagement with WiFY?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

In line with 2021 University wide COVID procedures, these interviews were held over zoom and permission was obtained to record the interviews with the provision that the material would be de-identified. The three interviewers individually transcribed their interviews and then met to analyse the themes and codes present in the data set. As well as the collected data set, we collated the success of women within the FYC within the period of 2019-2020 with respect to research fellowships, successful promotions, leadership roles, grants and awards.

A limitation of this pilot evaluation is that it has a very small sample size. Further evaluation will be conducted with a wider number of participants in the future. In acknowledging the smaller sample size, and therefore smaller opinion size, we also acknowledge the potential for confirmation bias (Kappas et al., 2020). It is also important to acknowledge that the evaluation must delve deeper through surveys and interviews for all women in the FYC to better understand the impact of WiFY, as well as reasons for non-participation.

Despite the small sample size, the interviews provide a snapshot of the potential for this program to be considered at other institutions. Even a positive small sample demonstrates the power of such a program for the advancement of leadership, promotion, camaraderie and confidence for women in academia.

Results

The results of the three semi-structured interviews with invited members of the FYC WiFY group were analysed to understand their experiences and the benefits of participation in the WiFY CoP as a vehicle for empowerment and motivation, leadership up-skilling, and career progression within a teaching-focussed College. The participant interview data were categorised into themes based on the responses to the semi-structured interview questions. Four themes were identified after a thorough thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts: individual outcomes, building self-efficacy, sense of community and perceived barriers to women pursuing leadership roles and career progression. In addition, the respondents made suggestions about other WiFY interventions they would like to see in the future. This speaks to a shared ownership of WiFY by women academics in the College.

Description of the themes

Theme 1 - Individual Outcomes

The first theme identified was how WiFY supported the individual outcomes for participants. The participants were able to articulate the successes they had achieved as a result of being involved in the WiFY CoP. All three of the women interviewed had recently successfully applied for either a promotion or a SSP and clearly articulated that the WiFY program of activities had contributed to that success.

When asked how the WiFY program had assisted her, Participant 1 indicated that WiFY gave her 'the confidence that I could apply [for SSP], connecting me with a mentor within your group, that was helping with my application, giving me feedback on my application (as well as my other supervisors)'.

Theme 2 - Building self -efficacy

The three women interviewed all identified that being a part of the program gave them greater confidence and belief in themselves, and their abilities to lead and grow as academics. Participant 2 indicated that as a result of being a part of the workshops, she came away with the message, 'Don't feel that you can't apply or it's too early for you. If you feel that you tick the boxes that you know, you can be ready to go. And it just gave me that bit of a confidence booster, I think just give it a go'. All three participants indicated that they felt more confident and better prepared to apply for such things as leadership roles, research fellowships, promotion and SSP.

Theme 3 - Sense of Community

The third theme identified through the analysis of the interview transcripts was the sense of community participants indicated that they experienced while participating in the WiFY program. Two out of the three participants interviewed used the word 'sisterhood' to explain how they felt about the WiFY program. Participant 2 stated 'I actually love the WiFY group. I think the WiFY group is a fantastic idea. I've never heard of such a thing anywhere else '. The same participant also stated that she 'love[d] that idea that there's support from women my age. Participant 3 indicated that 'the idea of helping others in a workplace is so foreign to me' and she appreciated the collegiality and support for the women in the group.

Theme 4 - Perceived Barriers

The fourth theme determined through the analysis of the interview transcripts was that of perceived barriers to women in regard to leadership opportunities within the University. The three interviewed women were all able to give examples where they felt that their gender was a barrier. Participant 1 indicated, "I already came from a research background, but it gave me a leg up [being] specifically a woman, knowing that it's a bit harder to make it up the ladder in research and science." While participant 2 shared her personal experience with the statement regarding her academic opportunities, 'I did find that I was knocked back more compared to my male colleagues.' The third participant indicated that,

> *"I was in a meeting the other day, and I was the only female in the meeting, with a different group. I swear I mentioned a particular idea, two or three times, and was given the most briefest of responses, yet one of my male colleagues mentioned the same idea, or a similar idea, and received a lot of adulation for it…. And look I'm … I mentioned it to my husband after the meeting, I said look this is a really strange thing that happened … I just felt like I wasn't being heard, and when someone else mentioned the same idea and was totally applauded for it!".*

Evidence of success

As a result of this community of practice initiative, successes in 2019-2020 included: 6 women academics in the FYC (60% of total applicants in the FYC) applying and successfully being promoted to academic levels B & C; and 2 women academics (40% of FYC applicants) successfully promoted from C to D; 3 women academics (100% in the FYC) were successful in the competitive SSP and 35% of the research fellowships in the FYC were awarded to women academics compared to 22% in 2018. Testimonials from women academics highlighted the importance of the WiFY CoP, which was awarded a Vice-Chancellor's award for Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion in 2020.

Additionally, 2 women TFAs were successful in converting to TRA status; 4 women (45%) were awarded FYC-Pappas scholarships to travel to the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) Summer Institute Conference in Colorado, USA. In 2020, 1 woman academic was successful in receiving a scholarship to pursue a higher degree for a project advertised through the WiFY program and supervised by 2 FYC women academics. In 2019-2020, 3 women were awarded individually and in teams, 4 external grants worth $360K. A WiFY member posted 2 posts on The Conversation with over 1 million views and an ABC radio interview on issues relating to public health and the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, in the most recent applications for leadership roles in the FYC, 2/3 successful applicants were women, taking the Senior Leadership to a 50/50 gender balance.

Discussion

The research literature shows female academics frequently encounter sexism, stereotyping, unconscious bias, and cultures of exclusion, invisibility and marginalisation within university settings (MacKinlay, 2016; McKenzie, 2017; Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017; Parker et al., 2018; Savigny, 2014). In terms of perceived barriers to achievement and recognition within the University, the women interviewed have all experienced sexism, exclusion, marginalisation and invisibility in some form in the wider university setting. One respondent described her experience of such invisibility and marginalisation, when her suggestions went unheard and ignored in a meeting, until a male colleague made exactly the same suggestions. She contrasted this experience directly with the sense of inclusion and safety she felt within WiFY forums and argued strongly for the value of "sisterhood" and support she felt within the all-female space. The other respondents spoke of experiences of being overlooked and undervalued, "knocked back" more than male colleagues. All three expressed that engagement with WiFY activities has resulted in increased confidence and motivation, of a sense of visibility and voice - feeling able to speak and be heard - and a strong sense of inclusion, sisterhood and support.

The research literature also shows that teaching-focussed academics are at risk of marginalisation and disadvantage, and that effective leadership (Probert, 2013; Probert, 2014; Probert and Sachs, 2015) and building a sense of community and support (Whitton et al., 2014) can mitigate strongly against this possibility. In the FYC, one of the concerns of WiFY has been the potential for intersectional disadvantage for women academics in a teaching-focussed setting. The participants indicated the leadership provided by the WiFY Executive, and the strong sense of community and belonging established within WiFY has contributed significantly to their sense of wellbeing and confidence and encouraged women to seek career progression and leadership roles within the FYC and beyond. Participant 1 stated that the WiFY Executive is, 'made up of amazing women and strong women and women who push back and say, "No, we're not doing that". We're not washing the dishes anymore.' Leading by example and sharing experiences of being 'real women', with lives outside of academia, by the WiFY Executive, detailing commitments to family, self and work, help to normalise some of the feelings exhibited by women in academia. Drame et al. (2012) indicated that women will sometimes redefine their definition of success based on where they are in their stage of life. Hearing stories of real-life situations can normalise how women are feeling as they juggle work and home commitments. The WiFY Executive have been able to create an environment where the women in the College are able to find, 'a sense of community, culture, collaboration … that is specifically women … with a common goal of supporting each other in terms of career' as stated by one of the interviewed participants.

The idea that women leading women in academia can empower, encourage, support and guide other women to greater self-efficacy through networking, workshopping and mentoring is powerful. The results of the interviews coupled with the recent successes of women within the College indicate the

success the WiFY initiative. Drame et al. (2012) indicated personal liberation and professional transformation occurred as women in a women's only writing and research group came together over time. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts indicates that the women in this study found that attending the women-led WiFY events has empowered them to leverage their teaching successes and innovations, and pursue teaching awards, leadership opportunities, and career progression despite being in teaching-focussed roles. Words such as: "opportunities, networking, support, valuable, sisterhood" were used by participants as they detailed how the WiFY initiative has helped them to pursue leadership, promotion and career progressions within a teaching role.

In our semi-structured interviews, each participant credited WiFY for significant career progression. All three respondents mentioned the WiFY workshop on 'preparing for promotion' as being pivotal for their career progression and leading to their eventual success in applying for promotion. One respondent who attended the WiFY workshop on promotion commented:

> *'I found it really helpful to have the WiFY there because when I went for my promotion in July from level B to level C, I did ask (name omitted) for a testimonial and she was amazing (and) I asked (name omitted) to have a look at my promotion [application] and she was amazing as well.'*

In this comment we can see that the WiFY Executive were also individually responsible for assisting an FYC woman with her application for promotion. Another respondent commented,

> *'the WiFY workshop that aided me greatly was the one on promotion which was in June . . . I've now got level C. The support was amazing, as was getting people to grant me testimonials.'*

She added that 'it was soon after that meeting that I attended. I think it just put it into perspective for me to just go for it.' The third respondent made similar comments, stating that a direct outcome of the WiFY promotion workshop

> *'was when I applied for a promotion from Level A to Level B. I was just saying that it worked, I got it the year I actually applied for it.'*

This respondent also credits the WiFY workshop on applying for SSP as aiding her successful application:

> *'It was pivotal to me applying for SSP, because without that I could not have, I don't think, completed my PhD. I applied for it, I was successful in receiving it, and as a result spent six months at the Cancer Council finishing my PhD. It was a really a fantastic outcome for me.*

We know from the research that as women continue to move up the academic ladder, towards Levels C, D and E, they are given more opportunity to engage with leadership formally and informally. In our own FYC, when academics are promoted to Level C they are asked to become line managers for small groups of staff. This is a level of leadership that is only attainable through academic promotion. Other leadership roles through VU and other Australian universities are similarly hierarchised making academic promotion vital for any woman with leadership ambitions.

The WiFY initiative was designed to be a safe place where women in a teaching-focussed College could meet both formally (workshops) and informally (lunches, networking) to create a CoP and a place where everyone could be heard and seen. The women-led initiative has developed to include promotion, work-life balance and research workshops, networking opportunities and social events. In doing this the WiFY initiative has enabled women in the College to feel valued and empowered as they strive towards finding a balance between academia, family, and other commitments. As

Coleman (2010) notes, women-only networks create a comfortable and non-judgemental space where women can be themselves without fear of judgement. Led by the Executive, WiFY has aimed to foster self-efficacy and self-belief for the women in the College so that they can feel confident to apply for promotion, leadership roles, research fellowships, knowing they have a team behind them providing guidance, encouragement, mentoring and support.

Leadership can be demonstrated in many ways. The WiFY initiative within the FYC has worked towards creating confidence for women in the College to be heard, supported, and challenged to be their very best. By showcasing what the women in the FYC can achieve with the 'sisterhood' behind them, providing mentorship, reading applications, acknowledging their struggles, the WiFY initiative has been able to prepare women for leaping into leadership opportunities, promoting themselves and putting their best selves forward.

Conclusion

Since late 2018, WiFY has served as a CoP initiative to improve collegiality for women, empower women to drive change around the status of teaching-focused careers, and enhance career and leadership opportunities for the 53 women academics in the FYC at VU. WiFY was formed to provide a space where women could support other women, to empower ownership over career progression, support teaching innovation and excellence, and foster the leveraging of this for career advancement and leadership. Professional development workshops were intentionally developed with the aim of team building, promoting confidence, providing mentorship, sharing teaching strategies, networking and collaborating on interdisciplinary research projects. Social activities were also included to encourage collegiality, belonging and friendships. The overarching aim of the group has been women leading women, to build peer support and foster a culture of advancement; to empower female teaching staff to improve their teaching practices; and leverage these innovations in teaching to drive recognition and career progression. WiFY has thus enabled the women of the FYC to develop and exercise leadership, confidence, and self-efficacy within teaching-focussed roles potentially impacted by the disadvantage and invisibility of 'women's work' in university settings.

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