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Driving Force

Family friendly writing retreat a win for early career scientists

July 12, 2013 | Author: Summer Allen, Graduate and Postdoc, Brown University



Carving out time to focus on writing is hard for young career scientists, especially if you have kids at home. (Image: CDC)

Early career scientists often have a difficult time juggling research and academic obligations with family responsibilities. Dedicated writing time is especially crucial and hard to come by for pre-tenure faculty. Last summer, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln tried a novel approach to helping with this issue by holding a week long writing retreat for STEM faculty and their families.

The [STEM Family Friendly Writing Retreat](#) was held last June and was funded by a [New Scholars](#) grant from the Elsevier Foundation, which supports programs designed “to help early-to mid career women scientists balance family responsibilities

with demanding careers in science, health and technology.”

21 faculty members from diverse scientific disciplines and locations across the United States and Canada participated in the retreat. The retreat combined long blocks of writing time, communal meals, discussions about work-life issues, help from professional writing coaches, and peer feedback. 12 of the faculty members brought their children to the retreat. The program partnered with the Lincoln Children’s Museum, where the children attended a science-themed camp for the week.

Six months later, writing from the retreat led to seven submitted papers (two successfully published thus far), two submitted books, a submitted book chapter, and four grant proposals (two funded for a total of \$1.5 million dollars). The program will continue to track the participants to see how the retreat has impacted their productivity. The University of Nebraska also wants to expand the program and will provide guidelines for other universities looking to emulate the retreat.

Personally, I think this retreat is a great idea from many angles. I’ve witnessed how difficult it can be for faculty to carve out significant chunks of time for writing. There are just so many other commitments—like meetings with trainees, serving on committees, and teaching responsibilities—that can take short-term precedence over the more nebulous task of writing. But the long-term goals of tenure and promotions depend on successfully writing papers and grants. A retreat that not only allows, but forces, participants to focus solely on writing—while providing tools for becoming better writers—is a fantastic idea in itself. Adding on a science-focused childcare program is icing on the cake. And I imagine that building camaraderie with other early scientist faculty could be very helpful and spread its influence beyond the week long retreat.

I wonder if a variation of this retreat—one that involves even earlier stage scientists like grad students and postdocs along with more established scientists—could help retain women in the science pipeline. Such a retreat could give young scientists the support to work on their own writing projects and provide connections with experienced faculty – who might even share their own tricks for surviving the intimidating combo of pre-tenure research and teaching plus children.

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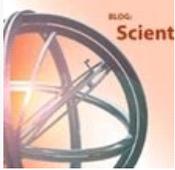
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