

Genesis of the Support Circle

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In the midst of the multiple crises and calls for justice that emerged or intensified in 2020 – the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing protests for racial, economic, and environmental justice – there was much anxiety and stress among people across the world and which includes faculty, staff, and students on Purdue’s campus. Many faculty members approached the Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence (Butler Center) trying to seek clarity about what to do or how to plan to shift courses to an online mode and handle the uncertainties that were suddenly unfolding in everyone’s lives. By the end of March 2020, Purdue, like many institutions of higher education, had in place remote work policies, including but not limited to guidance on finishing out the semester teaching online, how to ramp down and support lab spaces, and ways to conduct virtual meetings that accommodate for a wide range of work/life configurations. There was uncertainty and precarity all around. Hearing from faculty members constantly about their fears, anxiety, and stress, Mangala, assumed that someone else in administration would respond in some way – a committee or an intervention – and waited all through the summer of 2020. And then dawned the realization about why wait for someone else to do something, the Butler Center itself could take the initiative.

So, to respond to faculty experiences – their concerns about the uncertainty, the emotional labor they were engaging in, and the overall transformational experiences – and to mitigate stress, the Butler Center created the ‘[Support Circle](#)’ (or Circle) as a support and care network in August 2020.¹ The idea emerged from a conversation sparked by Corbera et al.’s (2020) article about care that Laura shared with Mangala. In this piece, Corbera and colleagues (2020) reflect on their experiences of confinement and the politics of transition during the pandemic – whether it was navigating poor internet connectivity, job loss, or donation of time to public health needs. Corbera et al. (2020) suggested that such a dramatic transition is an opening for higher education institutions to call for all to reconsider excellence in the academy. They further argue that faculty needs should be hinged upon an ethics of care. This article served as the foundation of a vital conversation of what care supports may look like at an institutional level. At the Butler Center, this led to discussions about the need to recognize the stress and upheaval that faculty were experiencing and ways to create space and community around the recognition of those experiences. As we exchanged thoughts, we also began to put together a draft note about what a care network could look like and how we can make sure diverse supports can be made available. The Support Circle began taking shape.

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¹ We use the terms ‘Support Circle’ and ‘Circle’ interchangeably.

Importantly, the Circle was not conceived to duplicate or replace the formal counseling services, other mental health services, or other formal resources at Purdue. Instead, we were trying to create something different. Since faculty success is integral to an institution's responsibility, by extension, that responsibility should be to provide care and support to the whole community. It is about resilience and vulnerability and the myriad of experiences within and across this spectrum.

The Circle, aimed at faculty, connects, builds ties, and provides opportunities to share experiences about experiences, stresses, uncertainties, and coping in these times. The goal of the Support Circle is to promote a culture of care on campus and cultivate a space where faculty can share and discuss various aspects of their well-being. As the original moment the Support Circle was conceived during a period where time availability, level of commitments, and work-life burdens were volatile and accelerating; we aimed to create a space that had a consistent structure of support but where access to faculty allies or resources were informal, flexible, and with no burdensome time commitments needed from the faculty. Such a support mechanism is much needed for faculty, particularly in the wake of the pandemic and the strain and pressure being felt by all, especially faculty of color. It started as a one-year initiative and continues.

Structure of the Support Circle

The Support Circle has a loose but formalized structure. The Circle takes an integrated approach to care and support and seeks to provide channels for faculty to discuss emotional, career, social, intellectual, creative, and environmental wellness. It was intentionally created as an *informal* and *flexible* space in contrast to the formal initiatives and programs that often check boxes but do not facilitate sharing experiences, vulnerabilities, and fears. In this way, we aimed for the Support Circle to operate akin to processes of consciousness raising, which can contribute to a greater sense of belonging and courage for faculty to face the uncertainties that people across campuses and the world are encountering.

The Circle also was cultivated to foster diverse forms of support in the academy. In this way, the Circle complements the Coaching and Resource Network (CRN) started in 2019 and offers a peer support circle of faculty colleagues who will listen to and talk with faculty about their concerns. In complement to the CRN, the Support Circle is a network comprised of two co-chairs and six Faculty Allies from across campus of diverse positionalities, ranks, and disciplinary homes. Importantly, we intentionally decided to generate a circle of allies who were already tenured and who already had – either informally or formally – practiced diverse forms of support and care in their work/life balance. Recognizing that faculty in the pandemic may have questions or concerns they did not feel comfortable sharing in their department and/or were hesitant to ask in more official spaces of the open town hall question and answer sessions held by diverse university offices during the pandemic, the Circle was meant to serve as an alternative space where faculty could reach out, ask questions, and find support. Faculty Allies have completed Safe Zone Training and a short workshop on Bias or Inclusive Academic Workspaces offered by the Butler Center. Additionally, we asked Allies to attend the workshop, “How Can Professors Practice Resilience with Vulnerability in the Academic Context?” offered as part of the Butler Center Conference of Assistant Professors on Oct 7, 2020.

Faculty can engage the Circle in three ways: attending one of the monthly sessions, reaching out directly to a Faculty Ally, or asynchronously engaging the resources posted on the Support Circle website. In 2020-2021, the monthly offerings and dynamic drop-in sessions were open that faculty allies hosted for anyone who wanted to join. As the Circle was created in response to changing circumstances, the available sessions later incorporated different brownbag talks from the allies, who discussed different aspects of care and support through the pandemic. For example, Karen Foli hosted a discussion on trauma-informed educational practices (TIEP) and Aparajita Sagar on diverse forms of mentorship, both of which have been developed into papers, featured in this special issue.

Foli, for example, in her piece, highlights how her engagement with TIEP took on additional importance in the pandemic as she employed this framework to teach and support graduate frontline nursing students during a required class at the height of the initial months of the pandemic. Her piece beautifully charts how she prioritized providing psychological safety in her course planning and enactment through valuing trustworthiness and transparency, collaboration and mutuality, and attention to the culture of nursing, among others. Her article is packed with detailed information on how she enacted these principles in practice. For example, activities such as supportive weekly email messages, low-risk participation, and multiple choices and pathways to complete work are just a few of the many strategies that Foli discusses in her article. She concludes with an opening, rather than closing, noting how scholars and teachers can engage in such a practice.

Sagar focuses on examining diverse forms of mentoring in the academy, exploring hierarchical, dyadic mentoring, group mentoring, and peer mentoring. In so doing, Sagar draws attention to the limitations of one of the more common forms of mentoring offered at institutions of higher education – hierarchical, dyadic mentoring. This form of mentoring, she shows, can reproduce and amplify power differentials and cause more stress instead of the improved academic experience for the mentee. Drawing upon recent literature, Sagar also shows how dyadic forms of group mentoring and peer mentoring, although different and distinctive, can increase agency of the mentee and significantly reduce the gatekeeping facets of hierarchical mentoring, and provide faculty with alternative, more supportive mentoring experiences. Importantly, Sagar notes that peer mentoring is critical for faculty needs that are “routinely rendered invisible in the academy.”

Since the initial format of open brownbag style sessions were met with success, we sought to expand the types of monthly offerings of the Support Circle in the 2021-2022 academic year. This took place in tandem with the Women’s Global Health Initiative (WGHI), Purdue University. In the early summer of 2021, Professors Dorothy Teegarden and Ulrike Dydak, Director and Associate Director of the Women’s Global Health Initiative - through Richard Kuhn, The Trent and Judith Anderson Distinguished Professor of Biological Sciences – approached the Butler Center to collaborate and partner. This new partnership, combined with the discussions amongst the initial faculty allies, led to planning for more specific topical sessions in 2021-22.

In fall 2021 (the current semester), the Support Circle series started with a formal announcement by Purdue’s Provost, Jay Akridge, of WGHI joining as a collaborative partner for this (Support

Circle) initiative. In this first kick-off session, Support Circle Allies and WGHI partners shared how they prepare for the academic year. The panelists discussed questions such as, what are some of the resources you lean on heavily throughout the academic year that you always share out? What are your biggest challenges at the start of each semester, and how do you prepare for them? What are some of the ways you plan for supporting or acknowledging others? A recording of this session is available [here](#).

In October 2021, a panel of six faculty members serving in various leadership positions such as heads and directors of centers outlined their responsibilities and how those relate to understanding culture, colleagues, and support, and how they interface with other leaders. Two vignettes created by the Faculty Allies were discussed regarding realistic expectations of how their position functions and where additional support may reside. Additionally, a workshop, Amplify Women and Gender Initiative, was offered on a virtual platform. Recording of the session is available [here](#).

In November, our WGHI collaborators set up a panel discussion on wellness by five faculty members. Focusing on mental health in academia, the conversation highlighted the stress and anxiety felt by women faculty in the hyper-competitive environment of academic research. The researchers offered their perspectives on the issues and shared practical tips for staying balanced to achieve work-life fulfillment. Theresa Mayer, Purdue's Executive Vice President for Research and Partnerships made remarks and attended the session. Recording of the session is available [here](#).

The final Support Circle event titled, Confronting Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Bias, is a session with Margo Monteith, Distinguished Professor of Social Psychology, College of Health & Human Services at Purdue University. The discussion focused on how to confront effectively and factors that influence both confrontation's effectiveness for reducing bias and the social costs of confronting.

We have plans to continue the Support Circle's topical sessions in Spring 2022. The lineup includes handling privilege, managing adversity, and possibly a workshop for mitigating stress. As the Support Circle continues to put on different events and resources, we hope that these various and dynamic offerings will provide faculty multiple pathways to find support and care when facing academic life today.

References

- Corbera, Esteve, Isabelle Anguelovski, Jordi Honey-Rosés and Isabel Ruiz-Mallén. 2020. "Academia in the Time of COVID-19: Towards an Ethics of Care." *Planning Theory & Practice* 21(2): 191-99.