

Building Relationships and Collaborating with Others to be Productive Scholars: What We Have Learned Thus Far

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Introduction

Higher education in the United States has transformed rapidly in the last two decades. One of the changes is in the roles and responsibilities of faculty positions and the needs of new faculty members (Sorcinelli 2007). Typically, three main responsibilities are expected from higher education faculty members, which include research, teaching, and service. Sometimes faculty members take additional responsibilities, such as having administrative roles and assisting in the accreditation efforts of their institutions (Barrett, Mazerolle, and Nottingham 2019). Through these responsibilities, faculty are expected to manage time efficiently to meet expectations each year for annual reviews and promotion consideration (Garand et al. 2010).

Some universities realize the possible needs of new faculty and offer academies or trainings to support teaching and research efforts, as well as encouraging collaborations within their institutions (Cook-Sather 2016; Meizlish et al. 2018; Weaver et al. 2013). During the first couple of years as a new faculty member, junior faculty may be assigned a mentor who answers questions and shares insights about requirements and suggestions regarding teaching, research, and service routines. Mentors and other resources may help junior faculty learn steps to succeed in academia by being an educator, scholar, and colleague in the institution (Garand et al. 2010). If support and resources are not available in higher institutions, both new and seasoned faculty may feel burned out and have difficulty meeting expectations and responsibilities required by institutions (Givens 2018).

Since the 1990s, faculty collaborations have been a growing trend in higher education, and scholars have examined the possible benefits and challenges of collaborating with others

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(Baldwin and Austin 1995). New faculty are usually advised to collaborate with others in research because it can be rewarding, reduce the feeling of burn out, and bring long-lasting benefits if collaboration is formed carefully (Baldwin and Chang 2007). Examples of benefits of collaborating with others include improving either personal or institutional prestige, learning from each other, and sharing resources (Baldwin and Chang 2007).

Collaborating with others is also found to predict the publishing productivity of faculty, when the productivity is measured by normal count (i.e., a faculty's total number of publications) (Lee and Bozeman 2005). Besides benefits of collaborating with others in research and publications, there are several challenges to research collaborations, such as experiencing cultural differences, difficulties of meeting the required time commitments (e.g., developing proposals and communicating), geographical distance with difficulties for face-to-face meetings, and power relations between the collaborators (Baldwin and Chang 2007).

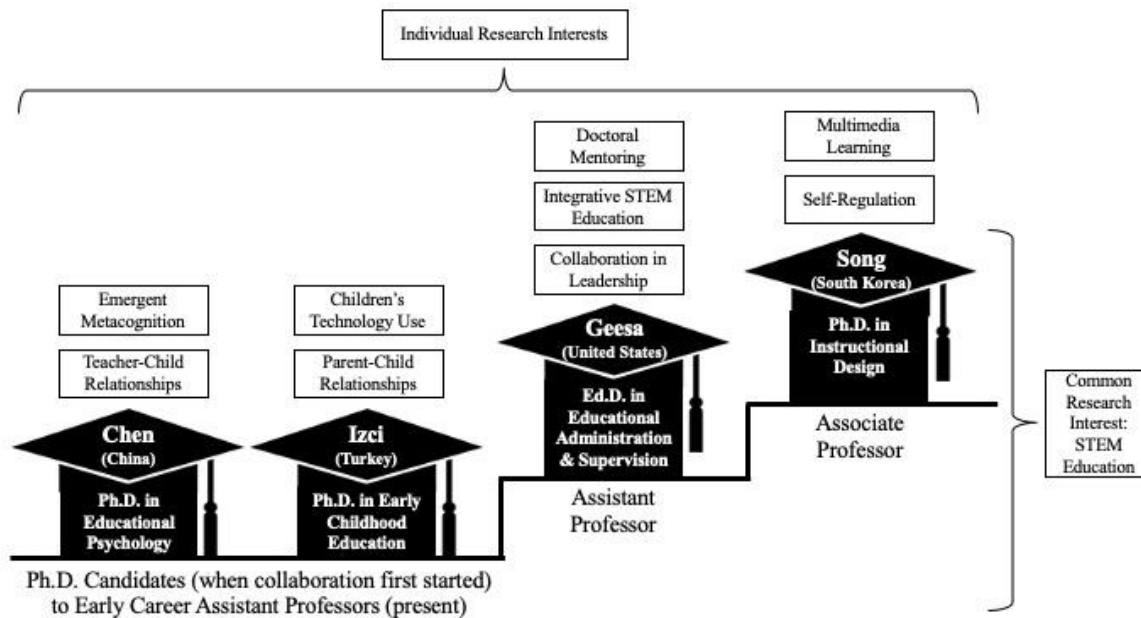
Not all collaborations are created in the same manner. Some collaborative teams benefit all collaborators, whereas other teams benefit individual collaborators differently as they work toward shared goals and expectations in scholarship and engagement (Baldwin and Chang 2007). We, a research team of four scholars (Chen, Geesa, Izci, and Song) respectively from Turkey, South Korea, the United States, and China and currently at four institutions in the United States, have "found our tribe" to form a collaborative team that offers support for, collaborate with, and be productive in research and scholarship through several projects during the past three years. While embracing our differences in nationality, gender, race, and native language, we learn from each other and expand our knowledge of one another's educational background and training. As scholars, we also inform each other about current trends in various fields of education in the United States and throughout the world. In this paper, we share our experiences and best practices we use to collaborate as a team and navigate scholarly productivity and successful careers in higher education through common research interests, strong relationships, and mutual respect for one another.

Becoming a Collaborative Research Team

Our team naturally formed through common interests and goals. Two members of our group (Chen and Izci) were doctoral students when they first met in graduate school in Florida. They took several graduate classes together and collaboration between them naturally evolved through interests in child development, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education.

Geesa, an assistant professor in Indiana, presented a paper related to educational leadership and STEM education at a national academic conference in 2017. At the conference, Geesa also attended two individual presentations about PK-12 students and STEM education by Izci, a doctoral student at the time, and Song, an assistant professor at that time in New Jersey. Common interests in STEM education and international perspectives of PK-12 education emerged in their research, and Geesa suggested a joint study and collaboration as a team for further studies. Despite our varying educational and professional levels when this collaborative work began (see Figure 1), we were excited to begin working together based on our common research interests.

Figure 1
Team Members' Research Interests and Academic Positions since Collaboration



With a focus on STEM education, we were interested in examining student achievement in mathematics and science in early grades and provide insights about educational practices and achievement in STEM subjects to educators, leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders in our home countries in our first group of studies. With our unique and personal experiences in educational systems, cultures, and languages in four countries, we share interests in learning from one another's knowledge of educational programs and foci in STEM education across these countries. Through comparative studies of our home countries, we found that we are familiar with educational policies and politics in our individual countries and can discuss their educational systems and cultures. Since we studied education in the United States and have positions in this country, we are familiar with education trends throughout the United States as well. This allowed us to broaden the scope of our research in the United States in the next group of studies that we developed.

Since our locations are dispersed across the United States, we cannot easily meet in person. After meeting in 2017, we collaborated remotely on projects for one year before meeting together in-person for a presentation at the 2018 annual conference of the Eastern Educational Research Association (EERA). Despite not having in-person interaction during that year, our team was able to work on and submit manuscripts to peer-reviewed journals and conferences through our weekly virtual meetings and digital communication. In the following years, some of us have met in-person for group presentations at American Education Research Association (AERA) and EERA annual conferences, and the annual conference for pre-tenure women at Purdue University, but the majority of our collaborative work occurs remotely and virtually.

We follow the same routine before, during, and after our weekly virtual meetings. For example, Geesa sends a meeting agenda before and the minutes after each meeting. Each member of our

team is responsible for completing assigned tasks, such as, reviewing the literature, editing papers, communicating with our individual university's research and grant offices, before our next weekly meeting. If there is an update regarding our work, we share information with the team before the meeting via e-mail.

Each team member blocks our weekly meeting time on their calendar, and we use that time to review tasks and goals, talk about the next steps or upcoming deadlines, and share information regarding our personal lives and careers such as, discussing accomplishments or challenges, asking career-related questions. After the meeting, we work on tasks outlined in the minutes to prepare for our next meeting. Securing our weekly meeting time keeps us on track to reach the goals of our team, complete the required research-related tasks, and receive informal mentoring from each other as we discuss social, emotional, academic, and career topics.

Self-determination To Succeed

Upon reflection of our three years of collaborative work, we agree that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) frames our collaborative and productive team approach (Deci and Ryan 2012). Adopted widely by companies and other career settings, SDT is a theory about motivation and task persistence. The SDT framework explains our close, collaborative relationships with one another and as a team despite our dispersed geographic locations. According to SDT, there are three factors that dictate one's commitment to a task or a team. The three factors include: *competence* (e.g., Are you good at what you do?); *relatedness* (e.g., Do you care about people you work with?); and *autonomy* (e.g., Are you in control of your goals and efforts?).

First, when we collaborate, we allocate roles and responsibilities for our research, presentation, and publication agenda based on what fits our needs and interests – *competence*. When our team decides upon a new research project, a crucial first step is assigning tasks. We assess our unique skillsets (e.g., topic background knowledge, data analysis methods, dataset access), and available time during a specific timeframe. We discuss and determine author order based on the level of alignment of the research topic with our individual research agenda, amount of time available to focus on the specific study, and needs for professional positions and promotions. Then, we volunteer to take on tasks and responsibilities that best suit ourselves and complement the team's needs and focus.

Second, we are democratic in our decision making – *autonomy*. We know that staying accountable for what we are assigned is important, but life events occur and we are available to support each other. Our plans change at times due to travel arrangements, professional schedules, family matters, and illnesses. Our team is understanding and accommodating when unexpected events happen. For instance, when a team member cannot attend an academic conference due to scheduling or health issues, other members assume the responsibility to present our research paper. The authorship on the presentation order changes accordingly with each member in acknowledgment of the changes. Also, the two most junior members of our team, Chen and Izci, were finishing their dissertations during the same time frame last year and the final months towards graduating with doctorates were filled with completing and defending dissertations. Geesa and Song, who have several more years of experience in higher education, assumed more responsibilities during this time to support Chen and Izci and enable them to have more time to complete their doctorates.

Third, we have a routine and collaborative relationship that allows us to work and explore ideas well together – *relatedness*. Through our work together, we have gotten to know one another’s personal interests, family situations, personal and professional goals, cultures, and areas of expertise, in addition to discussing topics related to STEM education. We enjoy meeting with one another and we seek advice and input from our team. Due to the positive collaboration methods we have in place, we recognize we are fortunate that our individual personalities complement our team well. We sincerely care about each other’s personal and professional lives, and we celebrate our individual and group achievements and keep each other updated on what is happening in our lives and major life decisions we make.

Each member of this research team inevitably has obligations as faculty in higher education. We regularly discuss and navigate ways to address teaching load, advising and mentoring, grant projects, service expectations, and international work together. In addition to the unique responsibilities and substantial workloads in our individual institutions, our collaborative team has published two peer-reviewed articles (i.e., Geesa et al. 2019a; Geesa et al. 2019b), prepared five manuscripts, written and submitted three grant proposals, and presented research papers in four academic conferences in a timely and consistent manner. Geesa is the first author of the two published articles, but the order of authors changes in other studies as we have open discussions about who would like to lead us in developing and submitting papers and proposals for new research.

Our team successfully collaborates through strategies we have identified to work best for us to be productive scholars, which include collective team goals, formal meeting agendas, individual roles and responsibilities, meeting minutes, shared research storage drive, virtual research retreats, and weekly virtual meetings. Rationales for each of these strategies are described in Table 1. In addition to these strategies, our team makes efforts to meet at least one time each year in-person at conferences to socialize, share our work, and generate new research ideas in each other.

Alliances and Mentoring Relationships

Within our team, we are allies to one another as we support each other and work towards individual and collective professional growth as scholars and educators. Although we all share similar interests in STEM education, our doctoral programs and majors differ from one another. Our individual majors complement our shared interests well, however, with foci in early childhood education (Izci), educational leadership (Geesa), educational psychology (Chen), and educational technology (Song) (see Figure 1). Additionally, our methodological research skillsets differ as we are a variety of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods scholars. Some of us have more experience than others in these types of research methods, and we support each other as we believe that our collective work will benefit all of us as we learn more about working together and contributing to the STEM education research base.

With diverse professional and educational expertise within our group, our collaboration to support each other through research, teaching, service, and the unique roles we have in our

Table 1

Meeting Strategies for Collaboration Toward Productive Scholarship

Strategy	Rationale
Collaborative team goals	We are aware of our individual and collective short-term and long-term goals. Each week we discuss next steps to take for our team to meet our collaborative goals, and share new ideas that are aligned with productive scholarship in our common research area.
Formal meeting agendas	Before each meeting, we develop and share an agenda with the team to ensure we are focused on our individual and collective research and writing assignments for the week. We also include new topics to discuss, such as grant and conference calls for proposals.
Individual roles and responsibilities	Each member of our collaborative team has roles and responsibilities for each project. The roles and responsibilities may change per project, but all members have specific tasks to complete in our collaborative work to ensure we are timely and productive.
Meeting minutes	During each meeting, we take notes and discuss research and writing plans to ensure we are working towards our collaborative goals. After each meeting, we share meeting minutes and our individual responsibilities with the team to prepare for the next meeting.
Shared research storage drive	A shared online storage drive for all team members to access and edit allows us to share documents, resources, literature, and writing with one another. Our research project documents and files are organized in digital folders, and we discuss items in the drive during our meetings.
Virtual research retreats	When we have a new research idea, grant proposal, or writing project to discuss, we plan virtual research retreats. These retreats allow our team to meet via web conference for longer periods of time (two to four hours) to discuss research questions, methods, long-term goals, and next steps to take in a more cohesive manner.
Weekly virtual meetings	Each week, our team meets via web conference for one to two hours to discuss our current research and writing work and make short-term goals for our next weekly meeting. Each team member shares their progress on their work, asks members questions about the work, and shares new ideas to consider.

studies and collaborative work strengthen our team. As mentioned before, one of the biggest challenges facing our team is our diverse geographic locations, differing time zones, and varying higher education institutions throughout the United States. After Chen and Izci became new assistant professors last fall, juggling newly assumed responsibilities added another layer of complexity to our collaboration. To alleviate this challenge, our weekly virtual meetings allowed us time to ensure that we are in agreement with the pace of our work and progress in research. As allies, we cooperate well, and we genuinely enjoy working together as a team through shared decision making and interests in our scholarly work.

In addition to our strong alliance as a team, we also experience mentoring in our relationships with our team members. For example, we are at different professional levels in higher education and we receive advice from and advise others in our team in mentoring relationships which address our social, emotional, academic, and career needs. There are unique challenges associated with each stage of our academic careers. For example, Chen and Izci find it hard to balance service, teaching, and research time; Geesa is focused on finding time for research in her schedule; and Song needs to balance work and family life. We address each other's social and emotional needs by listening to our concerns and successes, sharing personal experiences, asking questions, and helping each other develop a plan to take steps to move forward. Discussions about short-term and long-term goals, opportunities to network with others, participation in mock interviews and application material reviews, and additional meetings focused on individual writing, research, and productivity goals also take place as we mentor one another.

As a team, we work together as allies and mentors/mentees, and we are collaborative and productive in both collective and individual work. During our time working together, Song made tenure and was promoted as an associate professor, and Chen and Izci graduated with doctoral degrees and entered academic positions. Song, who identifies as a male, has the most experience as a faculty member in higher education and serves as an ally to Chen, Izci, and Geesa, who identify as females. We have open discussions about gender and rank in higher education, and Song mentors the other team members to help them achieve their professional aspirations. Geesa is the second most senior member of the team, and she shares perspectives of being a female faculty member in her institution and strategies to navigate promotion pathways in the field with Chen and Izci. In addition to our collaborative work, we have independent research projects and collaborate with other scholars that may enhance our team's research agenda and study developments. We support and celebrate our personal successes, while also recognizing our team's accomplishments. When stressful and trying situations arise, we are prepared to listen to, assist, and care for the person who is experiencing difficulties as well.

Lessons Learned Over Time

There are three major lessons we learned from our collaboration in the last three years: social accountability; professionalism; and the compatibility of our personalities, career trajectories, and expertise. In addition, we propose some strategies to help junior scholars in graduate programs or new faculty positions to collaborate with other colleagues and navigate successful careers in higher education.

Strategy 1: Keep regular and frequent meetings, voluntarily share tasks, and track all progress in a shared drive when working in a collaborative team.

Accountability is the key to success in a group work setting (Cady, Brodke, and Parker 2019), especially for a team with members in diverse locations like ours. We work in four different states and only meet in-person once or twice a year during conferences. For this reason, regular, weekly meetings and clear task assignments are crucial to our productivity. Sometimes, all four members could not meet together because of unexpected personal issues or schedule changes at work. However, we held weekly meetings with those members who could attend and shared what we discussed at the meeting in minutes. By reading the minutes, the member who could not attend usually volunteered to take on one of the tasks in the project. The accountability expands

beyond research projects that we are working on. We also share a monthly goals spreadsheet (including goals related to our respective universities and personal goals), and check our goal progress and set new goals each month. This intentional action enables us to be transparent about our work and held accountable in our productivity.

Strategy 2: Respect team members' time and perspectives, and be open to constructive feedback.

Professionalism is the key to fully utilizing the power of social accountability to guarantee team productivity (Sharmahd, Peeters, and Bushati 2018). Professionalism to our team means maintaining self-regulation, facilitating a respectful and collaborative atmosphere, and being intentional in our use of time. For example, each virtual meeting is followed up with meeting minutes by Geesa. These minutes include a summary of our meeting and our individual “homework” assignments, which is sent to all members of our team via email on the same day the meeting took place. This regular meeting schedule ensures everyone is held accountable and making steady progress towards our group goals.

Although we are a team, we recognize that disagreements are inevitable at times. For instance, each of us had different perspectives about the design of a new study. To ensure all of our thoughts were heard, we held a virtual meeting to share design ideas and develop research protocols. After the meeting, we participated in an editing train where each of us reviewed and revised the document in a specific order (i.e. Izci, Chen, Song, and Geesa). Our team members welcome constructive feedback. Instead of letting our differences interfere with work, our different views and misunderstandings always result in better research designs and collective decisions made.

Strategy 3: Be supportive of team members for research projects and career development.

We believe a successful team does not have to be comprised of perfect members. Rather, a “good fit” of each member in our team is an important factor for a product and positive collaborative relationships (Driskell, Salas, and Driskell 2018). It is important to have common research interests with others in a collaborative team. Collective goals, expectations, and routines and individual roles and responsibilities should be discussed with the team.

Over time, we have established our individual roles in our team. For instance, Geesa is a strategic planner and team leader who directs team efforts and holds team members accountable for their progress via weekly e-mails. Izci contributes her resourcefulness to our team, seeking data sources and funding opportunities. Izci’s approachableness and enthusiasm for our work are the glue of our team, strengthening the interpersonal relationships between members. Chen takes on the role of conducting statistical analysis and results reporting on projects, which puts her preferences and skills to use. Song is the most senior faculty member of our team, and he offers his unique, critical, and holistic insights into our team efforts.

In addition to the “good fit” of our individual personalities and expertise in our team, we are at different stages of our academic careers, creating opportunities for peer and group mentoring to occur. For instance, Geesa and Song conducted mock interviews and shared their insights on

academic jobs with Chen and Izci when they were doctoral students and secured academic positions at two different institutions. They continue to receive mentoring on topics, such as tenure promotion, work environment, university services, and work-life balance. This on-going supportive and collaborative network ensures a smoother career transition for junior members of our group.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shared our collaborative team efforts related to how we met, how we collaborate, and our lessons learned over time. Our PK-12 educational backgrounds in our respective countries and current research interests in STEM education fields allowed us to form a diverse and productive research team. Additionally, collaborating with our group members helped us learn various perspectives and expectations from junior and mid-career faculty members, boosted our confidence to work within interdisciplinary teams, and increased our productivity and knowledge related to STEM education. “Finding our tribe” was a key for us to collaborate with one another. It is also important for us to reflect upon our team structure and consider what we have learned from each other and together during this collaborative time. Without professionalism, respectful communication, shared goals, and accountability, our efforts to be productive scholars would be at risk of failure even after the first project or a manuscript.

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