Learning from our elders: the role Graduate Women Victoria in mentoring professional women.

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A significant number of women academics and professional women owe their success to Graduate Women Victoria (and its precursors), which has mentored thousands of women graduates since 1920. By connecting recent graduates with each other and with established professionals across metropolitan and rural Victoria (and similar national and international organisations) Graduate Women Victoria provided two essential elements to mentoring for women: positive same-sex role models (Shakeshaft, 1987) and a supportive environment (Gilbert, 1985).

Women’s participation in Australian higher education is the outstanding equity success story of the postwar period (Dobson, 1996) but significant gender inequalities remain (Blackmore, 2011; Carrington & Pratt, 2003). Mentoring remains essential to women’s equal participation in the workplace. Reassessing past practices and motivations will suggest new approaches to ongoing problems of gender inequality that may worsen under the impact of globalisation and economic reconfiguration.

Drawing on documentary sources, interviews with members, and thematic analysis identifying their motivation against the class and gender criteria developed by McCalman (1993) we reconstruct Graduate Women Victoria’s past and current actions in order to discover the social, cultural and biographical factors that led to success in moderating inequality.

Mentoring for women in academia has been under-researched in the last decade, but documentary evidence (AFUW, 2009; Alves, 1985; Nash, 1985) and interviews with members and women supported by Graduate Women Victoria indicate that the organisation has had a profound impact on women, particularly low-SES and minority women.

Conference themes addressed: creating and sustaining peer connections, establishing community connections


