

Tips for Emerging Sexology Professionals: Networking and Nurturing

by
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Reading “Getting a Foot in the Door” (Eule, Griffin, Lewandoski, O’Donnell, & Taketchara-Russell, 2005) brought me back to my own early years in the field of sexuality, and it reminded me specifically of the first professional conference I attended in sexology. The year was 1991 or 1992, and I think it was a combined AASECT/SSSS conference in San Diego. I was fresh out of college, and just starting graduate school. I remember feeling lost in a sea of famous names whose articles and books I had read. The highlight for me was sharing a cocktail hour with Dr. Elizabeth Rice Allgeier, who had coauthored my college textbook. I wanted desperately to approach her, but what does one say to a famous textbook writer? “Hi, I’m Bill. I really loved your chapter on paraphilias.” No, that wouldn’t do. Luckily, I remembered that Dr. Allgeier taught at the same university as my uncle. This turned out to be the perfect icebreaker, and so there I was chatting with Dr. Allgeier. She even said, “Call me Betsy” and expressed authentic interest in my career plans. I was in student-sexological bliss.

Sound ridiculous? Well, the sexological world did not otherwise feel very welcoming. Don’t get me wrong – no one was hostile toward me. Everyone seemed unaware of the emerging or future sexology professionals, not only at this

conference, but seemingly throughout my early years. It’s a tough “business” to break into. I remember my first visit to SIECUS in New York. I had read about the organization in “Betsy’s” book in the late-1980s, and decided it was a place I *must* visit. Unfortunately, my copy of *Sexual Interactions* (Allgeier & Allgeier, 1988) had one piece of outdated information in it – SIECUS’s *old* street address on West 4th Street in Manhattan. Probably, Betsy and her late husband, Richard, never anticipated that a crazy college student would use that address to go knocking on SIECUS’s door to ask for a job (or at least an internship), but that is exactly what I did. The former SIECUS headquarters had since been converted into an apartment complex, and there I was demanding entry of the doorman. The poor fellow did not know what to say as I repeatedly insisted that there was a “sex organization” upstairs. I was convinced he was concealing their identity, and did everything I could to explain I was pro-sexuality education. When he would not yield, I waited in Washington Square Park until his shift was over, and then tried my luck with the next doorman. I did not know, until months later, that SIECUS had moved to midtown.

I reflect on these early adventures at trying to get my own “foot in the door” with good humor, but also with a sincere appreciation for today’s college or

graduate student who is trying to do the same. While nothing ever became of my search for SIECUS (thankfully, not even a restraining order), there are some things that *did* work, and I'd like to share my learning with emerging professionals in the field; they are the future of sexology.

BE REALISTIC, AND EXPAND YOUR SKILLS

Becoming a sex educator, counselor, or therapist takes a lot of courage. If you haven't noticed already, the field is slim, and there are few entry points. Some of my colleagues recommend getting degrees in broader areas, like public health, health education, or social work, so that more opportunities are available as a student's career progresses. I received my master's degree in human sexuality from New York University, and while this worked for me, and some of my contemporaries, I do not know if I would recommend such a targeted course of study for everyone.

As a sexuality educator, I know that there are just not enough paid positions out there for me to spend my career doing sexuality education and nothing else. Further, these paid positions tend to be very low in salary. For a sustainable career as a sexological professional, you must think of your career ambitions in a broader sense! No matter how excellent your skills as a sexuality educator, counselor, or therapist, you will get little traction unless you also fancy yourself as a *manager or business person*.

For many, management and business skills are essential in the business of sexology. In sexuality education, jobs exist mainly in the non-profit world, in organizations such as Planned Parenthood. While there may be many entry-level positions for new sexuality

educators, the ones that are truly career sustaining, in terms of salary and professional growth, are at the administrative level – managers, directors, vice presidents, etc. In sex counseling and therapy, one must have business skills if one is to eventually run one's own business, or administrative skills to have a practical role in someone else's practice. These skills are *invaluable* when interviewing, as they allow you to rise above the competition. I sometimes get groans from my interns when I assign them administrative tasks. (Once, a graduate student turned down the internship because she did not like the thought of completing *any* administrative tasks!) The reality is that the professional sexological world is full of administrative work, and it is better to develop these skills sooner than later.

Among the many hats I've worn as the director of a sexuality education department are supervisor, fundraiser, grantwriter, marketer, and writer. There is not a chance I would have been hired without the supervisory skills and experience I brought into this position, having nurtured them in other past management positions. Just having had these experiences allowed my interviewing CEO to cross them off as prerequisites. I also brought writing skills into my work. This is an area in which many emerging sexological professionals fall short. If it is a weakness for you, consider taking writing classes as electives. As for the other skills, fundraising, grantwriting, and marketing, I brought nothing tangible to the table. Quite frankly, who would expect these are essential skills in the field of sexology? The three skills have a common thread – promotion. Consider if you were to design the most exceptional training program ever. Or the most earth-shattering therapeutic treatment. Or the

best couple's counseling around. Your creativity and expertise means nothing if you do not have the skills to tell the world. (Or to raise money to continue to support your outstanding work!)

Academic courses or practical experience with fundraising, grantwriting, and marketing could prove invaluable in your professional endeavors. When arranging a new internship, or a new job, consider asking your supervisor if there might be opportunities to assist with grantwriting. After your supervisor picks her/himself off the floor, you will likely be put straight to work! These are skills that are desperately needed in the field! As noted earlier, I was lucky to have brought management skills to my job, and this enabled me the luxury of learning these skills on-the-job. But if I had to do it over again, I would have taken a course to allow me to understand the construction and design of a budget. And it would have been nice to know how to write a grant, too!

BECOME WELL-READ

The coursework you encounter in sexological study will inevitably include the textbooks and other reading essential for the nuts and bolts of your future work. Try to expand your reading to equip yourself with greater dimension in understanding the field of sexology. I have heard this recommendation from both emerging professionals who are surprised at how little their fellow students read non-required books and fail to keep up with the news, and from expert colleagues who recommend reading that will enable you to understand the background necessary to become a leader in this field. Read about history, social issues, cultural issues, and psychology. When the controversial *Harmful to Minors* (Levine, 2002) came

out, I recommended that *everyone* read it. (I still do!) The book did not focus specifically on sexuality education, and I did not agree with everything author Judith Levine had to say. But she raised important issues to be discussed in the field of sexuality, and so this became important reading, in my opinion, for anyone doing sexuality education, or working in related disciplines. The same can be said of books like *Talk about Sex* (Irvine, 2004) and *The Scapegoat Generation* (Males, 1996), both of which I find important for understanding the cultural context of sexuality education. For a backdrop of sexuality in general, pick up a copy of *The Guide to Getting It On* (Joannides, 2004). You will find much of its contents echoed in your other texts, but written in a style that reminds us that sexology does not need to be as stuffy as it is sometimes communicated. (This is precisely why the author is on the editorial advisory board of the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*!) Also read *Let Me Count the Ways* (Klein & Robbins, 1999) for insights on outercourse that are essential to sexuality education, counseling, and therapy.

Look at bibliographies from trusted organizations, like SIECUS and Advocates for Youth. Planned Parenthood Federation of America posts an excellent summary of new books of interest to all sexological professionals in its monthly *Educator's Update*, available online at www.plannedparenthood.org. Ask experienced colleagues what additional books they recommend.

NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK!

Meeting Betsy Allgeier at an AASECT/SSSS conference may seem trivial, but for me, just being at that conference was a major step in my professional development. I

rubbed shoulders with people who had the pulse of sex education, counseling, and therapy. I immersed myself in workshops, plenaries, and keynotes, even when I could not fully grasp the subject matter. I raised my hand and asked an intelligent question in a room filled with 500 of my more experienced contemporaries. I went to round tables and the cocktail hours. I made it so that my face became familiar. Beyond this particular conference, I went to other workshops and conferences. I always sat in the first row and asked questions.

Have good humor as you network. Years ago, I met Marty Klein (in my mind, it was “Wow – *the* Marty Klein!”) at an AASECT conference. I was wearing a black suit, and Dr. Klein innocently mistook me for a waiter and asked me to bring more water. I suppose I could have responded in a variety of ways – with insult, outrage, etc. Instead, it became a humorous icebreaker – one that Marty and I still laugh about today!

Be sure to network with your contemporaries too. My friendship with Elizabeth Schroeder, coeditor for the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, began when I offered her a ride home from a weeklong conference eight years ago. We were both relative novices in the field, and I was being kind to offer Elizabeth a ride, but I also wanted to spend the time learning as much as I could from her. Elizabeth had expressed brilliant thoughts during the week, and I wanted to listen to her, and to share my own thoughts, too. Intellectually stimulating discussions are good for the brain, but they also present important opportunities to connect with one’s own contemporaries, together with whom you will share the future sexological community.

USE TODAY’S TECHNOLOGY

Today, students have certain additional advantages. The Internet makes it easy to know where professional development workshops and conferences are happening throughout the United States and worldwide. Many workshops are inexpensive or free, too! Students can attend and then send an e-mail message to the presenter, give feedback, ask a question about the presentation, or ask where you could learn more about the topic. And, the way most people’s electronic address books work, once you’re in, you’re in forever. You may be added to announcements they send, which will further your networking opportunities. (If you are someone who receives far too many e-mails from me, you might see this as a disadvantage!)

Ask to be put on mailing lists, both electronic and print. As you further your networking, ask people about the list serves to which they belong. If these are open lists, subscribe to them. If they are closed lists, find out how to become a member. You might want to set up a special e-mail address specifically for your list serv reading. Over time, you will find yourself unsubscribing to the lists that are not helpful, and maintaining the ones that are most critical. If you disagree with something that is voiced on a list serv, respectfully disagree. Be sure to explain your position well. People will respect a well-reasoned, dissenting argument, and it will add to your stature in the field.

LINK YOURSELF WITH KEY LEADERS

AASECT member Lorna Littner stresses the importance of establishing key connections with established leaders in the field. “Based on my own experience at the beginning of my career, I would suggest either interning with an

established professional in the field or volunteering for an organization that provides services in line with your career goals,” said Littner.

I have been very lucky to have two exceptional mentors, Bob Francoeur and Peggy Brick. Bob is a well-published author, professor, and editor. I did not know any of this when I met him on an international studies program in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1992. I befriended Bob and learned of his early work on what would eventually become the *International Encyclopedia of Sexuality* (Francoeur, 2005), the recipient of last year’s AASECT book award honor! At the time, it sounded like a tremendous project, and I envisioned his project becoming one of the most important resources in our field. I decided right then and there that I would link myself with Bob. I offered to guest-present his classes, grade his papers, facilitate his SARs, and help with his research for the *Encyclopedia* and for his other book, *Taking Sides* (Francoeur, 1991). Six years later, I was teaching one section of his course, and coauthoring *Taking Sides*.

With Peggy Brick, I interviewed for a job as a sexuality educator in 1991. I didn’t get it. Peggy reminds me today, “You were too green then!” Though I did not get the job, I sent Peggy a letter every year updating her on what I was doing in the field, and how my professional development was progressing. I knew that Peggy was a key leader in the field of sexuality education, and I wanted to impress her. No luck, every year, until seven years later, she called back to say she was retiring, and she invited me in to interview for *her* position. Today, I run the wonderful Center for Family Life Education that Peggy created.

So if you don’t get a position you were hoping for, ask why. Many people, like Peggy, will generously offer feedback. Then work on developing the skills you need, and keep your connections.

BE PATIENT AND WORK YOUR WAY IN

If I were an emerging sexology professional, I would be reading those last paragraphs and thinking “six years later?” “seven years later?” with incredulity. Who wants to wait that long? But, of course, you are not idle in the interim. Find work, or internships, in the interim, while you pursue your academic studies and your dream.

Students can integrate their sexological interests with their current professional work. The caring nature of many sexologists, and many emerging sexologists, often lands us in human services fields. “Humans” are a common thread throughout human service fields, and as such, always have sexuality education needs! You may find that program administrators will be thrilled to have this otherwise unmet need met for the people being served!

It is certainly understandable that one must pay the substantial bills that go along with college and graduate school. But for goodness sake, working someplace like Starbucks offers nothing experiential related to the study of human sexuality, unless something more interesting is happening at your Starbucks than mine! Continue to try to find a job in the human services field, and an employer that will allow you to run sexuality classes when you are not performing your primary responsibilities. The exposure to humans and their extensive needs beyond sexuality (and beyond coffee) will be invaluable. Entry level counseling

positions are available at homeless shelters, programs for battered women, agencies that serve teens at risk, people with developmental disabilities, senior citizens, etc. Come to work equipped with a copy of something like *Streetwise to Sex-Wise* (Brown & Taverner, 2001), which offers step-by-step procedures for teaching a series of sexuality education classes. Better yet, become one of the few people that actively address the sexuality education needs of senior citizens. Peggy Brick and Jan Lunquist have created an exceptional collection of lessons in their book *New Expectations: Sexuality Education for Mid and Later Life* (Brick & Lunquist, 2003). There are, perhaps, fewer than ten people in the country who have extensive knowledge of sexuality and older adults. If you can land a job in a senior citizen's center, or other program serving older adults, and teach a regular series of classes, you may soon find yourself with an expertise that few people have.

I paid the bills by managing group homes for people with developmental disabilities when I was in graduate school. Granted, it was far more demanding work than Starbucks, but it was also far more rewarding. My employer was thrilled when I offered to run desperately needed sexuality education classes, and this became part of my regular job. As my work and studies progressed, I found myself writing this agency's sexuality policy, and developing a tool for measuring informed sexual consent (DeMarco & Taverner, 1992). The evaluation of this instrument also served as my thesis! As an added perk, I sometimes found myself offering to staff the overnight shift, which was staffed in case of an emergency, with about six to seven hours of "down time" until residents woke up. The quiet time was perfect for

writing papers and completing schoolwork. How often can you be paid at the same time you are doing your schoolwork?

BECOME A PRESENTER!

Learn how to present a short, one or two hour workshop. Then, while you are networking and learning about upcoming events, you can offer your services. Believe it or not, there are resources out there that will tell you, step-by-step how to present on a particular topic. Two of my favorites are *Bodies, Birth, and Babies* (Brick, Fishal, Lupo, MacVicar & Marshall, 1989) and *Positive Encounters* (Vogelaar, 1999). The former provides complete outlines for various training programs dealing with the subject of early childhood sexuality, intended for various audiences, including early childhood educators, administrators, and parents. *Positive Encounters* shows all the steps for giving a workshop that trains counselors, educators, and other professionals how to have positively-framed discussions with teens about sexual matters. Other training outlines can be found at ETR's website (<http://www.etr.org/recapp>) and elsewhere. Find a topic you are comfortable with, and learn to present it. Or make a workshop of your own! Try to find a specific niche that is not currently being addressed. Whatever topic you choose, you'll find that many organizations will not require you to submit an abstract or proposal, and some will offer honoraria!

GET YOURSELF PUBLISHED!

Earlier, I noted how my connections with key leaders in the field led to eventual publications. There is an even easier way to get published: write a review! Find a book (or a video/DVD, website, etc.) about which you have strong opinions and substantial insights. Write a review and

submit it to an academic journal, like *Contemporary Sexuality*, the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, or another journal relevant to the topic and your areas of interest. You'll find that it's a whole lot easier to get a review published than a longer article, and, in many cases, a publication is a publication! You'll be on your way!

DON'T BE AFRAID TO GET FEEDBACK!

There was a time when I could not get *any* feedback. I would stick by my first drafts, too intimidated by the idea of red marks all over something I worked on so hard! Today, I *never* write *anything* without having others critically review it. Even this relatively short article has already been reviewed by four of my trusted colleagues, including two emerging professionals, Jessica Ducey, who is interning for the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, and Kira McGroarty, who is beginning an internship with SIECUS.

Asking for feedback invariably improves the quality of your work. Even if you decide not to incorporate *all* the advice, you will inevitably find helpful suggestions on grammar, punctuation, structure, or content. There is also networking value in asking for feedback. It allows you to make a legitimate connection with an experienced professional that you might not otherwise be able to bridge. Tap into someone's expertise judiciously. It's best to highlight a particular section of an article you've written, and *then* ask for feedback, rather than sending the whole manuscript!

If you do not have the luxury of having written something for which you could ask feedback, ask about an expert's impressions about something you've read related to their expertise. Or comment on

something you've read by them. It goes without saying that the question should be something about which you are truly curious! Understand that some will be more generous with their responses than others. Try not to take a short reply (or a non-reply) personally. I've found people who choose sexology professions to be extremely dedicated to their work, and a non-reply is most likely an indication of their high volume of work.

FINALLY, A WORD TO MY EXPERIENCED COLLEAGUES...

In composing this article, I asked for feedback from colleagues about how we could make the field more welcoming for emerging sexological professionals. I received a response from Maggi Boyer, someone who generously stuck out her hand to meet me at my first Planned Parenthood education director's conference, and who has remained accessible ever since. Maggi offered the following:

"I would suggest that when we meet newcomers to the field at workshops, seminars, etc. we offer to stay in touch by phone or email if they have questions/concerns. In fact, it may make it easier for newcomers if the seasoned professional makes the first contact following the meeting. It takes the 'oh my gosh, how can I possibly call/email that accomplished person when I'm just starting out' nervousness away. That way, we're the ones who are extending ourselves. Though I also think it's smart to do so only with a very few folks, so we don't get overwhelmed and unable to respond appropriately or in a timely manner. There is something so amazingly satisfying to an 'old timer' (OK, 'seasoned professional') about contributing to the growth of a newcomer, something

about mentoring even informally that has rich rewards for the mentor – and hopefully is useful to the mentee as well. It gives an opportunity for the mentor to do a little reflective thinking him/herself about the field, about where things were when we were young in it, about the changes we've experienced, about what we've learned personally and professionally and about our own personal and professional priorities. And the mentoring could be so easy to give: recommend a book, suggest a web site, make sure s/he knows about a conference or a seminar; link her/him up with others in their geographical area that we know; have coffee occasionally if they're in the same area, etc. Maybe you know someone who will be attending the same conference as the newcomer. You could ask your colleague to be on the look out for the newcomer and to introduce her/himself. It doesn't have to be a long term 'coaching' relationship – just a grounded, experienced welcome to the field.

So, see, it's really all about paybacks for the seasoned professional!"

Early on in my career, I made a decision to make time for every student or new educator who wants to talk about a career in sexuality. I have been fortunate to have had people like Bob Francoeur, Peggy Brick, and Maggi Boyer in my life and I can also remember many brief interactions that made an impression on me, like the kindness of Betsy Allgeier at that first conference. But I also remember the feeling of being lost in a sea of experienced and famous faces, and not know where to go or what to do to catch a break! Let's keep the door open for our emerging sexological professionals. Invite them into the conversation. Encourage them. They are our future, and they will become our contemporaries.

WILLIAM J. TAVERNER, M.A., was named "one of the country's pre-eminent sex educators, trainers of sex educators, and sex education theorists" by the online journal *Sexual Intelligence*.



He is the co-editor of the *American Journal of Sexuality Education* and director of Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey's Center for Family Life Education. Mr. Taverner is the author of numerous sexuality education books, including *Sex Ed 101*, *Making Sense of Abstinence*, and several editions of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Human Sexuality*. He has trained thousands of educators and other professionals throughout North America, and was the first recipient of AASECT's Schiller Lecture Award, for best group approaches to sex education. He is an adjunct professor of human sexuality at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

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