

Professors Find Support in "Sistah Circle"

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Secluded from the hustle and bustle of family life and university obligations, four women on the Tulane faculty have created for themselves a citadel of constructive criticism, founded on a platform of mutual trust, respect and goodwill.



At A Studio in the Woods retreat center, the “Sistah Circle” meets to talk about writing and academia. They are, from left, faculty members Beretta Smith-Shomade, Rebecca Chaisson, Nghana Lewis and Katie Acosta. (Photo by Sabree Hill)

Katie Acosta, Nghana Lewis, Beretta Smith-Shomade and Rebecca Chaisson have united in what they call the “Sistah Circle,” a newly formalized writing group. Through the support of the Newcomb Center for Research on Women, the group meets monthly at A Studio in the Woods retreat center.

Under the auspices of Tulane, [A Studio in the Woods](#) is a facility located on the Mississippi River that provides space for visual, literary and performing artists to work.

According to Lewis, the four, as women of color whose disciplines range from sociology to African diaspora studies, use each other as sounding boards to ensure

their work “is in conversation with an academic audience as a whole.” Acosta adds that “in academics, we often don't talk about the act of courage that goes into sharing your work for the first time. There's something to be said for having trust with a few people.”

The professors say that this base of support and shared goals is proving crucial as each faces the often daunting thresholds within their academic careers, from tenure certification to the attainment of full professorship.

“Within academia, male and female faculty members may get tenure at comparable rates,” Acosta notes, “but male faculty members tend to rise to full professorships more quickly than do women. This is not a Tulane issue but rather a concern within the academy at large.”

Beyond the functional purpose it serves for its members, adds Acosta, the funding Sistah Circle received from the [Newcomb Center for Research on Women](#) represents an institutional commitment “toward directing attention and resources to women and women-related issues.”

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