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Case improving climate for women faculty with help from NSF grant

ACES program helping increase number of tenure-track women teaching in the sciences, engineering

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Case Western Reserve University has dramatically increased the number of women on its engineering faculty, thanks in part to an innovative program designed to increase the number of women faculty in the physical and natural sciences and help women already on the faculty with their careers.



The program, known as Academic Careers in Engineering and Science (ACES) is funded with a five-year, \$3.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation as part of the Foundation's

ADVANCE Institutional Transformation program. Its goal is to increase the number of tenure-track women teaching in the sciences and engineering and to eliminate some of the barriers, both institutional and in terms of attitude, that make it difficult for women in these fields to advance their careers. The program is in its second year.

Women comprise about 29% of Case's faculty, the same level as five years ago. In the sciences and engineering the figure is approximately 22%. Nationally, 25% of sciences and engineering faculty are women.

ACES has already had an impact on the Case School of Engineering (CSE). The school added three women to its faculty at the start of the academic year, bringing to 12 the number of women on its faculty, or 10.2% of the total. That compares with 9.9% for engineering schools nationally. Three years ago women accounted for 4% of the CSE's faculty.

"Increasing the number of women on our faculty has been a high priority for us," said Robert Savinell, dean and George S. Dively professor at CSE. "We know there are many highly qualified women available, and ACES has provided useful tools for enlarging our pool of applicants to include more women. It is also helping our faculty become more aware of some of the issues facing women in academia."

ACES currently is being implemented on an experimental basis in four departments across the university: Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering (part of the Case School of Engineering), Chemistry (part of the College of Arts and Sciences), Physiology and Biophysics (part of the School of Medicine), and Organizational Behavior (part of the Weatherhead School of Management.)

Lynn T. Singer, deputy provost and vice president for academic affairs, is the principal investigator for the grant and oversees the ACES program. "Hiring more women in the sciences and engineering is not just a matter of fairness, but affects

the university's standing in the academic world," she says. "We won't be competitive unless we're seen as a welcoming place for everybody. We can't afford not to have policies that make this a great place to work."

Singer notes that the pool of women with PhD's in the sciences and engineering is growing at nearly triple the rate that Case is hiring them. "Clearly we need to step up our efforts," Singer said.

ACES is using a multi-pronged approach to bring about change, including coaching for women faculty members, the chairs of their departments and the deans of their schools; mentoring for women faculty; networking; and training and development. The coaching is being conducted by professional corporate executive coaches, including doctoral alumni of the Weatherhead School's Department of Organizational Behavior.

Diana Bilimoria, associate professor in the organizational behavior department explains that the coaches employ techniques similar to those it used for corporate clients. The coaching for senior women faculty focuses on leadership development, while the emphasis for younger faculty is on career development, such as networking and increasing visibility, and work/life issues, such as balancing the demands of parenting, teaching and research.

"The model we are using emphasizes techniques such as 360-degree feedback and development of a leadership plan," Bilimoria explains. "It has been quite effective in the corporate world."

Cathleen Carlin, professor in the physiology and biophysics department, says the coaching has helped her. "It's helped me articulate and prioritize the things that are important to me in my professional and personal life. That would be of value to anyone, regardless of gender or academic role.

"But I'm not sure it's had much of an impact on an institutional level yet," Carlin adds. "People have to be able to talk about gender issues openly, and that's just starting to happen. I think a lot of good stuff potentially can come out of this process, but it takes time to incubate."

Lawrence Sayre, chair and Frank Hovorka professor of chemistry, says the coaching "has made me more sensitive about the ways I communicate. For example, I've learned that you can get into trouble with email because a lot depends on how it's interpreted by the recipient and if they try to read between the lines for hidden messages."

Chemistry Professor Mary Barkley says that as a result of ACES the College of Arts and Sciences, of which the chemistry department is a part, has instituted a new hiring program to promote diversity. Applicant pools for new faculty hires in all university departments must be reviewed by the dean's office to ensure that the pool reflects the gender and ethnic makeup of the overall pool of potential applicants for the position.

"This acts as an incentive for search committees to really beat the bushes," Barkley says. "It means going beyond just running an advertisement for a position opening, but instead going to meetings and conferences and actively recruiting." Money for travel to such meetings is provided through the ADVANCE grant.

Another important element of ACES is mentoring for women faculty. In coordination with her department chair, each woman faculty member creates a mentoring committee consisting of one senior colleague from the same department, one senior faculty member from a related science or engineering department at Case, and one person from the same discipline at a different university or research institution. The mentoring committees provide advice on issues such as obtaining grants, publishing, teaching performance, student advising duties, and promotion and tenure expectations.

The ADVANCE grant is also being used to sponsor week-long visits to campus by senior women scientists and engineers, and to provide "opportunity grants" to Case's female faculty. "The idea behind these grants is to pay for things that are often greater barriers for women, such as travel to a conference or child care while attending the conference," Singer explains. "Sometimes even a few hundred dollars can make a major difference in a woman's career."

After an evaluation of the initial phase, ACES will be extended to all 31 departments around the university that are eligible for NSF funding beginning in 2005. "The ultimate goal is to make this a truly egalitarian environment as well as a great place to do science," Singer says.

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