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Rutgers plan targets faculty gender gap

BY **KIRK MOORE** • STAFF WRITER • NOVEMBER 28, 2008

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Laurie Rudman says she made the professional jump from dance and theater into social psychology "because I was tired of being a struggling artist."

But when she walked into professor John Fleming's class at the University of Minnesota, Rudman says, her first thought was: "That's like theater." Her art would prove a valuable tool for constructing ways to test people's reactions to social situations — and find how subtle factors of gender still affect women decades after the sciences and other occupational fields were nominally opened to them.

"Women are now 54 or 56 percent of college enrollment . . . but only about 30 percent are in the science-technical-engineering-math fields," said Rudman, a professor at Rutgers University. "So there's still a big difference in the hard sciences."

In this fall semester, Rutgers is using a \$633,885 grant from the National Science Foundation to start a five-year program to "promote the participation and advancement" of women in science, engineering and mathematics at the Camden, Newark and New Brunswick campuses.

"Rutgers has one of the finest women's studies programs in the world," said Joan Bennett, a university associate vice president in charge of the Office for the Promotion of Women in Science, Engineering and Mathematics, and principal investigator for the NSF-funded project.

On the other hand, she said, "the math department has 62 faculty members, and two are female. Half the students are female. Something's wrong with that."

An abstract describing aims of the project lists goals of increasing recruitment of female and minority faculty, reducing the turnover of women leaving for other jobs and institutions, and getting more women promoted to full professor and higher professorial ranks.

Job satisfaction is another goal, through more collaborative projects and involvement of science faculty with the university's Institute for Women's Leadership and the Women's and Gender Studies program.

Women's ranks in law and medicine have swelled, but surveys show science faculties in much of academia remain around 10 percent female, and institutions have varied responses, Rudman said. Her work on gender discrimination with Fleming in Minnesota figured in Lois Jensen's landmark sexual harassment lawsuit against a taconite mine, dramatized in the 2005 film "North Country."

"Columbia (University) collected those numbers and sat on them for years. Rutgers took the position that



According to Rutgers University Sociology Professor Patricia A. Roos, "(female students) don't make that transition to graduate school as much. And they don't make it into faculty as much." (STAFF PHOTO: KIRK MOORE)
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A \$633,885 grant from the National Science Foundation is paying for five related initiatives at Rutgers, according to an abstract issued when the grant was released in August:

Increase the numbers of women on Rutgers' science, engineering and math faculty through recruitment and retention activities, such as an organized system of mentors for younger women, training for search committees that help choose new hires, and leadership training for established professors.

Improve communication among faculty on the different campuses, and establish professorships open to competitive applicants.

Encourage interdisciplinary research across Rutgers schools and campuses, and have female faculty to work closely with the Rutgers Institute for Women's Leadership on leadership training, research, and interdisciplinary courses.

Make women faculty more visible, through lecture series, nominations for awards, using the university media office to generate press coverage of research, and a bigger Internet presence.

Develop family initiatives that help dual-career couples, families with children and elders.

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they were appalled," she said. That commitment from the Rutgers administration helped the National Science Foundation conclude that Rutgers is "a good seeding ground" for promoting women in science, she added.

In 1992 the American Association of University Women published a report, "How Schools Shortchange Girls," that postulated girls do poorly and need special attention from educators. The past decade has seen a push-back against that notion, with other researchers reporting alarming findings that boys' academic performance is in sharp decline.

But data still clearly show women encounter impediments in science fields, said Patricia A. Roos, a professor of sociology and a co-investigator for the project. A former social sciences dean, Roos and other women took notice of a 1999 study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that documented decades-old imbalance in that faculty, and in 2000 she became involved in a similar gender-equity study of the Rutgers faculty. Investigators found Rutgers "was not that much different from other research universities" with its subtle factors that "limit women's access and mobility within academia," she said.

"The pipeline remains a pipeline" for female students, but "there are losses at every step," Roos said. "They don't make that transition to graduate school as much. And they don't make it into faculty as much, or senior positions."

"The way social scientists look at it is, they recognize the most overt kinds of discrimination have waned," Roos said. Impediments are mostly subtle, arising in "interactional and personal relations," but those are still "discriminatory in outcome," she said.

There has been "a sea change in employment" for women, Rudman said. "What people haven't changed is attitude at the implicit levels," like an association of masculinity with "leader-like qualities," and assumptions that "warm, communal" females lack the rigor for scientific inquiry, she said.

It tilts toward "self-selection out of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields," Rudman said. When it comes to female students selecting those as their academic tracks, "you even have negative reaction on the part of parents, particularly moms," she said.

Rudman said she's been approached about providing training to faculty selection committees, so they can become aware of unconscious attitudes and prejudices. Social psychology research shows that when it comes to self-reported attitudes, "people lie like crazy," Rudman said. "I have a more charitable view: People don't know the subtle messages that are rolling around in the backs of their brains."

Common wisdom has it that discrimination is dying out, and in fact "younger people are more ecumenical about everything," Rudman said. "But at the implicit level you don't see much difference."

"My sense is some of the younger women don't see this, because they come out of high school feeling empowered," Roos said. But "when we talk to women about this project, they get it," she added. "Our hope is we help more people get it."

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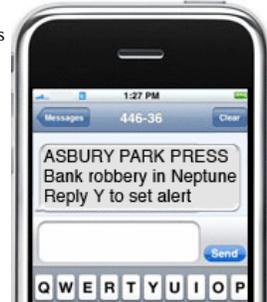
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