Faculty Focus

Organization Supports Women in Science

By Monette Austin Bailey

Kathie Olsen, deputy director of the National Science Foundation

Being a scientist at a major research university near the nation’s capital means being able to tap into a wealth of resources. Debra Weinstein, president of Maryland’s new College Park chapter of the Association for Women in Science, wants to help ensure that colleagues take full advantage of these benefits.

Associate director of the Maryland Pathogen Research Institute, Weinstein had been a member of the association’s Bethesda chapter based at the National Institutes of Health for several years while working in that area. She found, however, that “it’s virtually impossible to get to NIH for a 4:30 symposium” from the university.

While talking with female faculty, she discovered that many of them were association members, too, and decided to start a new chapter of the national association here.

“We have a population on campus that’s sensational … so many wonderful, successful women to spotlight,” she says. “We don’t want to focus on the struggles that women in science have. We want to focus on the opportunities.”

The representation of women in the sciences has increased, though it still lags behind men. According to the National Science Foundation, women accounted for one-third of science and engineering postdoctoral degrees awarded in 2005, an increase from 29 percent in 1995. Yet, fewer women make the transition to principal investigator from a degree program. At the National Institutes of Health, for example, women hold only 19 percent of the tenured senior investigator appointments in its Intramural Research Program.

There are numerous reasons for the disparity, Weinstein and her colleagues say.
Sometimes women researchers lack good child care for their often non-traditional schedules or guidance from senior women. Pam Lanford, a lecturer in the Department of Biology who earned her graduate degree at Maryland, says that the AWIS is necessary.

“My hope for AWIS is not just that we provide wonderful examples, but concrete resources,” she says, such as help finding child care, since women generally, no matter their vocation, still shoulder the majority of child-care responsibilities. We also hope to highlight career options for women that keep women in the sciences but can offer flexibility for family responsibilities, says Weinstein, who has worked part-time since the birth of her second child in 1991.

The chapter is starting small, says Weinstein, with plans to add a mentorship program and create a programming committee. Men are also welcome to join. For its kick-off event last month AWIS-College Park hosted a seminar by Kathie Olsen, deputy director and chief operating officer of the National Science Foundation, called “Women in Science: Never Say Die!” Weinstein will try to schedule another seminar for the end of February or beginning of March.

Though her plate is full with institute responsibilities, Weinstein knows that her AWIS efforts are not in vain when she sees comments such as the following from a seminar attendee: “Within the first five minutes of the presentation, I was so motivated about my career path that I wanted to head back to the lab, finish my Ph.D. work and start looking for an exciting career to begin,” wrote Stefanie Sherill, a graduate research assistant in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry.

Adds Weinstein, “That’s says it all.”

For more information on the Association for Women in Science-College Park chapter, contact Debra Weinstein at debbie@umd.edu. Visit www.awis.org to learn more about the national organization.

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