

EDITOR'S PAGE

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A Title IX Challenge

Debra R. Rolison Naval Research Laboratory

This guest editorial marking Women's History Month is by Debra R. Rolison, who heads Advanced Electrochemical Materials at the Naval Research Laboratory. She received a B.S. in chemistry from Florida Atlantic University in 1975 and a Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1980.

I entered college coincident with the Education Amendments of 1972, commonly called Title IX, which state, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be . . . denied the benefits of . . . any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." My question 28 years later is this: Is it time to convince Congress to "Title IX" U.S. chemistry departments for their entrenched inability to increase the number of women represented on their faculties? In other words, should federal funds be withheld from those universities that do not increase their faculty hires to reflect the pool of U.S.-granted chemistry Ph.D.s—one-third of whom are women?

Now that I have your attention, consider the following argument: We will have lost the premier opportunity to improve equity on chemistry faculty unless women fill their share of the positions opening up as the academic chemists hired in the 1960s retire. The women are there, they are good, and the positions are there, or about to be there, in droves. If we do not use this opportunity to increase the fraction of women chemistry faculty beyond the pathetic 5 to 10% where it has languished for decades, we have every reason to be ashamed of our profession.

Many faculty will counter that applications from women for advertised positions are only 10% of the total. So, why aren't women applying? Why are they voting with their feet against a career in an institution they know all too well?

Consider women to be the "canaries in the mines." Their disproportionate absence from the applicant pool is the signature that an unhealthy environment exists in U.S. chemistry departments: unhealthy to those men and women who want children (and to play a continuing, rather than merely genetic, role in their lives) or to those women who—once they demonstrate productivity, scholarship, and mentorship—still reap less respect (and the ancillary rewards of space, salary, funding, and awards) than their male colleagues.

Like it or not, we need to admit that the current state of U.S. chemistry departments does not serve a modern society.

Our chemistry departments are unhealthy because of what they have chosen foremost to reward: money brought in to do research. The first duty of chemistry faculty—even at research universities—should be to the young people whom they have chosen to teach, mentor, and guide in the joys of chemistry. Chemistry departments will attract more women as faculty if the greatest rewards go to those who excel at training and challenging students.

Chemistry departments need women—and not only to show the majority of their undergraduate chemistry students (who are now women) that a career in academia is a viable path. Men, because they have been and predominantly still are the stewards and beneficiaries of the current system, have a moral responsibility to transform the current environment. But the changes necessary will require more than just well-meaning departments: The deans and university presidents must lead the charge.

And what better impetus is there to university administrators than a whiff of the loss of the dollars from federal grants? Such a possibility is indeed a dire extremity, but one that makes other practical, achievable alternatives look downright reasonable, such as aggressively recruiting good women candidates for faculty openings, ensuring on-campus day care, mentoring the junior faculty through the minefields, and really rewarding the good teachers and advisers because of how they guide and challenge their students. Note that these suggestions help men, too.

Regardless of how the transformation begins, if at least a third of the hires over the next five years aren't women, I posit that it is time to lobby Congress to take away the money, because there really is discrimination against women in U.S. chemistry departments.

And the women are not the problem.

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