

College of Engineering Dean's Advisory Committee on Female Faculty

Report of Interviews with Senior Female Faculty

Prepared by the ADVANCE Program

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In fall 2013, the College of Engineering Dean's Advisory Committee on Female Faculty asked the ADVANCE Program to examine how senior women Engineering faculty view leadership opportunities within and outside the College. In December all full professor women were invited to participate in the study. Seventeen of the 22 women agreed to participate (77% response rate) and interviews were completed in February 2014.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained interviewers who had no direct or indirect relationship with the faculty person being interviewed. The questions, at the request of the committee, were circulated in advance to the interviewees and served as a guide for the interviews.

We learned from these interviews that these senior women in the College of Engineering are interested in leadership positions (and many of them had held such positions). Nevertheless, they perceive serious challenges that limit their ability to comfortably and successfully take on such roles. Following is a summary of the key points identified from the interviews; a full report follows.

Senior women faculty's interest in leadership:

- All women who were interviewed had served in some kind of leadership capacity and most were interested in taking on a leadership position in the future.
- Most thought leadership positions were available in the College and University but many indicated that there is ambiguity about how to know about them, how to indicate an interest and how individuals are selected for leadership positions. [Some of the women had expressed interest in a leadership position they did not get.]

Reasons for them to take on leadership positions:

- Most thought it was important for women to be in leadership positions because they bring a different perspective to the issues and they serve as role models for female students, postdocs and junior faculty. Even those who were not strongly drawn to a leadership role would consider it for these important reasons.
- Women did not express interest in leadership roles for the status or power that may be associated with those roles; rather, they see these positions as opportunities to make positive change and help others.

Challenges to considering leadership positions:

- Many of the women noted that female faculty assume an unequal burden of service that left them little time for other opportunities; some also noted that women are often asked to perform service but much less often invited into a leadership position.

- Similarly, the extent of service they perform early on can affect the extent to which they may be considered for leadership: too much service can slow down the rate at which they are promoted, yet too little service is understood as their having no interest in leadership.
- The women described a gender difference in how leadership roles are considered; women are less likely to promote themselves for positions that they are, in fact, interested in (and noted they would be viewed negatively if they pushed too hard for a leadership position).
- Women are generally reluctant to take on a leadership position unless they feel they have the resources necessary to be effective in that role; ineffective leadership could negatively affect that individual's career but, more importantly, negatively affect the careers of the faculty for whom that leader has responsibility.

Time demands:

- All of the women saw balancing teaching, research, service and personal life as challenging to taking on a leadership role.
- Many women expressed concern that their research careers would suffer, or even end, if they took on a leadership role; resources are not available that would enable them to maintain their research while assuming a leadership role.
- Several noted that leadership roles can impinge on family responsibilities and women generally have fewer support options at home compared to men.

Challenges to being effective in leadership positions:

- Many women described experiences of sexism that make it difficult for them to take on leadership roles. These include perceiving the women as "junior" even though they have been promoted to more senior ranks, as more appropriate for support roles, and negatively if they aspire to leadership roles; women also described specific sexist comments directed to or about them.
- The women also identified many potential aspects of leadership positions that make it difficult to be effective; these included lack of authority and being micromanaged, insufficient resources (e.g., budget, staff), personality conflicts, and competing agendas.