

APR05-2005-000352

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the APR05 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

Time to Thrive, Not Just Survive: Accumulating Advantage for Women in Science

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Our departments of science, technology, mathematics, and engineering (STEM) need more women as faculty, and not only to show their undergraduates that a career in academia is a viable path. Their absence warns us that an unhealthy environment exists: unhealthy to those scientists who want fulfilling lives beyond academe and unhealthy to those women, who once they demonstrate productivity, scholarship, and mentorship, still reap less respect, space, salary, funding, and awards than their male colleagues. The recalcitrance of too many of our research universities toward diversifying their faculty is a national disgrace in that these universities covet a diversified student body, but do not reflect that pool of talent onto their faculty. Similar difficulties are apparent among the staff of National and Federal laboratories. Self-reform is not getting it done, and is especially frustrating in light of the historic opportunity to change the demographics as scientists and engineers hired in the 1960s retire. Is it time to apply the logic of Title IX—the loss of Federal funds—for the entrenched inability to increase the number of women represented on STEM faculties? Such a threat may be the impetus necessary for university administrators to create departmental environments that women are willing to call home. The July 2004 release of the GAO report on Women's Participation in the Sciences (which also surveyed DOE facilities) reminded those Federal agencies that fund scientific research that Title IX is the law and that these agencies must begin Title IX assessments of compliance in the STEM departments and institutions they fund. It is past time that women thrive, not just survive in their career homes. Using the mechanistic philosophy of Title IX—denial of resources to recalcitrant departments and laboratories—may be the start of a truly inclusive scientific enterprise in the United States. We must accept this opportunity to redirect the nature of the research enterprise to one that is inclusive of diversity: both of the humans who will undertake the S&T journey into the 21st century and of the educational and knowledge base they will need to take with them on that journey.