

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND POLITICS OF ESTABLISHED WOMEN IN ENGINEERING PROGRAMS: A REPORT OF A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

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This roundtable discussion was intended primarily for those who have already established and developed university-based programs, and who were interested in a frank exchange concerning strategies for further developing or strengthening internal support and resources, including consideration of organizational culture, politics, structure, and staff. The session was interactive and all attending were expected to participate and contribute to the discussion, bringing their own particular interests and concerns to the table. Questions that we anticipated would emerge included: What have others tried and found successful in securing budget line item support? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having staff report directly to the dean of engineering, or of having a program affiliated with the women's center instead of the deans of science and engineering? Should the program director have an engineering background? What is the best way to make a successful case for more staff once you've established the need?

Twenty-seven individuals participated in the discussion. A number of recurring themes emerged from our conversations as critical components of long term program success and sustainability: public relations, funding, institutional organization, political support, and program development. The following represents a summary of the discussion.

Good public relations programs for women in engineering programs are important for a number of reasons. Documenting the need for the program for a wide audience will help all those involved to acquire a common understanding as well as requiring the program director to think clearly through the salience of various aspects of the program and the needs it addresses for each potential audience or constituent. A particular challenge for our programs in today's environment is the attack on affirmative action, increased scrutiny of programs intended to assist groups under-represented in science and engineering, and backlash of those who do not support the programs. In earlier years, it was less common to hear from those who were skeptical of the value of programs targeting the advancement of women and minority populations. Now, we can expect it, and need to marshall proactively the information and arguments to help educate those who may be less familiar with the historical patterns, statistics, and systemic dynamics which have prevented women and others from being full participants in engineering and science. We should also seek out partners to collaborate in public relations endeavors. For example, professional organizations, associations, and societies which serve the advancement of science and engineering are often engaged in the same basic message about the need to educate all students more broadly in science and engineering. It was suggested in this session that WEPAN might serve as a clearinghouse for fact sheets, tip sheets, responses in defense of affirmative action, questions for search committees, speeches, and "road shows" all to support our common endeavors. WEPAN-L is a very

useful tool for this kind of internal communication and might feature a topic of the month.

Funding continues to be a challenge for the development and sustenance of women in engineering programs. Initial sources of support are often not sustainable; corporate contributors don't want to support programs forever. Many external funders want to support *new* programs, projects, or strategies, but are not interested in sustaining existing ones, no matter how effective and proven they may be. The reality of increasing fiscal constraints, prompted by numerous external trends, particularly the decline in growth of external funding for science and engineering and, on some campuses, declining enrollments, impacts allocations of internal funding.

In considering institutional organization, it is apparent that institutional knowledge – of the organization, of people, of the “culture” and how decisions are made – is invaluable to the successful establishment of a program. If a program director does not have this knowledge, it would be wise to seek out those who do as advisors. Of particular concern for established, continuing programs was the question of what happens when a supportive, charismatic leader leaves the institution. Clearly, such individuals have often been quite instrumental in initiating, establishing, and continuing to support a program. Not only are leaders invaluable in promoting and supporting the initial development of a program, but if they depart and their successors do not share the same priorities their departures can jeopardize the future of the program. This kind of departure, which is not unusual, underscores the importance of developing over time a wide base of support for a program, building coalitions, ensuring that both continuing and newly appointed leaders are well-informed about the program's need, effectiveness, benefits to the institution as a whole. Such political support will be most effective in the university if it involves not only designated leaders such as deans and presidents, but also the mainstream tenure-line faculty, since in university governance it is the faculty who provide most of the direction for the academic enterprise and who must ultimately be the change agents within the university.

In terms of program development, it is essential not only to build a strong and broad base of internal support, but also to consider accountability. What are the quantitative measures and benefits of such programs? What university or external enterprises benefit in particular? Examples might be the admissions office, alumni relations, general public relations, placement operations, corporate and foundation relations, and so on. What entities provide financial support for the program, and to what extent do they share in some of the benefits, short term or long term? As programs develop, it may be useful to consider a broader base of support, for critical mass necessary to sustain program support, for economies of scale in operation, or to gain or maintain crucial institutional support. One example is expanding a women in engineering program to embrace women in science. Or, there are potential linkages on some campuses with those doing research on science and gender, gender issues in education, and evaluation. Some programs have become coeducational, and are now striving to create coeducational programs which can establish new models for gender equity. In considering expansion or re-definition, the particular institutional structure and support systems will be critical in determining whether or not such action makes sense and will be advantageous to the program's direction. Our dynamic external and internal environments require us expect change as a constant. But often this change can be used advantageously. We need to view change and challenge as opportunities, and plan to take advantage of them.

Roundtable Discussion Participants and Contributors:

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