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Today's News

Wednesday, January 31, 2001

9 Research Universities Pledge to Treat Female Scientists Better

By ANA MARIE COX

Leaders of nine top research universities signed a pledge Monday to work toward better treatment of female faculty members in science and engineering and to consider "potentially significant" changes in university policies to promote equity. The pledge followed a meeting at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology between the leaders of the universities and 25 female professors.

The conference was held at the invitation of three M.I.T. faculty members who led a 1999 internal study of bias at the university -- Nancy Hopkins, Lotte Bailyn, and Lorna Gibson -- along with Charles M. Vest, the president of M.I.T. The M.I.T. study, which led officials at the institute to acknowledge that female faculty members had been mistreated there for years, has prompted widespread discussion among female scientists and engineers nationwide.

Presidents and provosts from the California Institute of Technology, Harvard University, M.I.T., Princeton University, Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University attended. Representatives from the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Ford Foundation, which sponsored the meeting, were also at the meeting.

Ms. Hopkins said that the agreement of administrators that gender discrimination does exist differentiated this meeting from previous attempts to call attention to the issue. "There have been hundreds of reports just like M.I.T.'s, collecting dust," said Ms. Hopkins, "When the president says 'it's true,' then it's true." Of the group's willingness to discuss the topic, she said, "I thought it was a milestone that never could happen in my lifetime."

The group's closing statement said that barriers "still exist to the full participation of women in science and engineering," and went on to pinpoint three goals to work toward:

- "A faculty whose diversity reflects that of the

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students we educate."

- "Equity for, and full participation by, women faculty."
- "A profession, and institutions, in which individuals with family responsibilities are not disadvantaged."

The statement went on to say that the goals the group has set for itself "will require significant review of, and potentially significant change in, the procedures within each university, and the scientific and engineering establishment as a whole." The group agreed to meet in about a year to share the specific plans made to achieve their goals.

The female scientists at the meeting expressed full support for the conference's outcome. Barbara Grosz, a professor of computer science at Harvard, called the meeting "extraordinary" and complimented the group's ability to recognize that "the issue wasn't simple numbers, but a whole complexity of factors."

M.I.T.'s Mr. Vest agreed, saying that statistics and individual accounts were both necessary to understand gender discrimination: "Clearly, you need both."

Gladys Brown, interim director of the Office of Women in Higher Education at the American Council on Education, did not attend the meeting, but in commenting on the group's announcement, she echoed Mr. Vest's statement. She said that the group's statement seemed to focus on "structural components, but you're also talking about the quality of work life."

Ms. Brown was generally pleased with the results of the M.I.T. meeting, saying, "It is a tremendous effort." But, she said, "we need to make sure there is an assessment and evaluation component, and accountability." Mere goals don't do enough, according to Ms. Brown. "The general consensus is that 'we'll focus on these items,'" but "we need to make sure that each campus is making the kind of strides it is committed to, but we also need to hold individuals accountable. That means providing rewards for those who have achieved these goals, and -- let's just say 'disincentives' for those who do not measure up." Then, said Ms. Brown, "you have a plan, rather than an acknowledgment of the issue and the intent."

Background article from *The Chronicle*:

- [An MIT Professor's Suspicion of Bias Leads to a New Movement for Academic Women](#) (12/3/1999)
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From the issue dated December 3, 1999

An MIT Professor's Suspicion of Bias Leads to a New Movement for Academic Women

Faculty members at other universities seek to apply her approach to promote gender equity

By ROBIN WILSON

Cambridge, Mass.

Nancy Hopkins has done for sex discrimination

what Anita Hill did for sexual harassment.

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The full text of [a report](#) on the treatment of female faculty members at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

It took years before Ms. Hopkins, a professor of biology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, realized that what was happening to her here on the

campus amounted to discrimination. By the time she did, she says, it was 1993, and her research program had ground almost to a halt. Her laboratory was tiny -- 1,500 square feet -- and starved for money. It was capable of sustaining only a handful of graduate students.

Today, six years after she first complained of unequal treatment, and eight months after M.I.T. released a stunning report acknowledging discrimination against female scientists, Ms. Hopkins's career has taken off.

Her 5,000-square-foot lab buzzes with activity, as two dozen graduate students tend to the 150,000 zebrafish that she uses in her DNA research. She has been given an endowed chair, and financial support for her work has reached \$2.5-million a year -- much of the money given to the institute by Amgen, a leading biotechnology company.

It was Ms. Hopkins who led an internal study that documented gender bias against women in the School of Science, resulting in the university's unexpected admission last spring. The revelation has not only helped jump-start Ms. Hopkins's career, but it also has made her a national spokeswoman on academic discrimination in the 1990s.

"This gave gender discrimination a visibility no one could ignore," says Catherine J. Didion, executive director of the Association for Women in Science, based in Washington. Never before, she and others say, had such a prominent institution been prodded into making such a public acknowledgment of sex bias.

This fall, Ms. Didion has received more than two dozen telephone calls

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from women who want to duplicate the M.I.T. study on their own campuses. "This was like an elephant sitting in your front yard, and many college officials have felt a need to respond," she says.

Among those that plan to study gender equity: the California Institute of Technology, Case Western Reserve University, Harvard Medical School, the University of Arizona, and the University of California at Los Angeles.

In the coming weeks, the Ford Foundation is expected to ante up money to help Ms. Hopkins and her colleagues at M.I.T. organize a conference and share their experiences even more widely. The group has asked the foundation for \$1.4-million, although it probably won't get that much. There is also talk of establishing an e-mail network to provide a support system for female scientists nationwide.

As for Ms. Hopkins, the accolades keep pouring in. Just this fall, she was made a member of the National Academy of Sciences' prestigious Institute of Medicine. "I am phenomenally happy," she says.

Her revitalized career is proof, she says, of what can happen when a scientist gets the support she needs. She acknowledges that she might just as easily have joined the ranks of academic women who lodge discrimination complaints and wind up losing their jobs or filing lawsuits that take a toll both personally and professionally.

"Even though it seems like women have been talking about gender discrimination forever," she says, the M.I.T. study broke new ground. It painstakingly compared the resources provided to male and to female scientists -- including salaries, research funds, and laboratory space -- and found that the women came up short. It showed that senior female scientists on the campus felt "marginalized," out of the loop of academic decision-making.

The bias wasn't conscious or willful on the part of men at M.I.T., according to the report. Gender bias in the '90s is not your mother's sex discrimination -- it operates in a "stealthlike way," says Ms. Hopkins. Unintentional as it may be, though, it can have devastating effects on women's careers.

Officials at M.I.T. say the climate is improving for all women there. Last spring, the School of Science granted tenure to six women, the largest number ever in a single year. The school now has 22 tenured female professors, compared with 15 in 1995. There are 174 tenured men. And for the first time this year, a woman, Tania A. Baker, was appointed associate head of the biology department. Women have never chaired any of the academic departments in the School of Science.

Since the institute began looking into gender discrimination four years ago, many female scientists here have seen their salaries climb by as much as 10 per cent in one year, based on the institute's analysis of

what their pay should have been. The average faculty raise is around 4 per cent. Women have been asked to lead search committees and important academic panels, and their requests for additional lab space have been speedily granted.

Much of this is the handiwork of Robert J. Birgeneau, dean of the School of Science and "a man who gets it," women on the campus say. It was Mr. Birgeneau who agreed to appoint a committee in the school to document gender discrimination four years ago, and it was a letter from Mr. Birgeneau, released by the institute last March with the committee's report, which argued that even though the discrimination here was not "conscious or deliberate," it was "real."

His remarks, and the effort he has made to do away with inequities at M.I.T., have made him something of an "administrative authority on gender issues" around the country, he says. "I wish my research was as good as my sociology," says the dean, a physicist by training. This fall, the institute's four other schools followed his lead and established committees to look into bias against their female professors.

Ms. Hopkins hopes the effort may help female junior faculty members at M.I.T. avoid the feelings of isolation and alienation that she felt after arriving on the campus in 1973. She joined M.I.T.'s faculty fresh from receiving a Ph.D. in biology and biochemistry from Harvard University, and fresh from divorcing her husband. She was ready, she recalls, to devote her life to science with a singular zeal -- pledging to forgo remarriage and a family for the sake of her career.

True to her word, Ms. Hopkins never did remarry or have children -- but for years, her career never took off. She lost battle after battle for laboratory space and research support, chalking up her defeats to the competitiveness of academic science. "I was unhappy every day," she says, describing a work life with very few female colleagues and no mentors at all, male or female, to teach her about writing grant requests and other tricks of the trade.

Finally, after 17 years at M.I.T., Ms. Hopkins changed her research specialty from the investigation of cancer-causing viruses to the less competitive field of developmental biology and DNA. She figured that the move might bring her more success. But it didn't, at least not at first.

She had trouble getting her new laboratory up and running. As a kind of souvenir on her office windowsill, she keeps an inch-thick file that bulges with the memorandums, letters, and measurements she compiled five years ago in a vain effort to persuade her department that she needed an extra 200 square feet of lab space.

It was in the midst of that battle that Ms. Hopkins saw a copy of M.I.T.'s policy on sexual harassment. "It said harassment was to be in a place where the atmosphere was so threatening you couldn't do your work," she recalls. "I thought, This is my entire life."

She packed up her files of documents and went to a lawyer, who felt that her case involved sex discrimination and advised her to complain to M.I.T. officials. She did, telling both the provost and the dean that she believed discrimination was at work. In short order, she had a crucial microscope for her new lab and the extra space that she'd been seeking for nearly a year.

But her troubles were not over. As she was setting up her new laboratory in 1994, her department took away a course she had helped developed. She declines to name the course or the professor who took over, but the job went to a male colleague.

Phillip A. Sharp, who was chairman of the biology department at the time, refused to talk about the situation with *The Chronicle*, saying only, "The department of biology is very proud of its women faculty." Robert T. Sauer, the current chairman, did not return several telephone calls and e-mail messages.

After her course was reassigned, Ms. Hopkins drafted an angry letter to M.I.T.'s president, Charles M. Vest, saying that what had happened to her amounted to discrimination. Before she sent it, she asked a female colleague to read it, just to reassure herself that she hadn't overreacted. The woman not only praised the letter but asked to sign it. When the two of them decided to ask the other senior female scientists at M.I.T. whether they felt the same way, all but one of them agreed.

"I went to these spectacular women scientists, and I was embarrassed to approach them," recalls Ms. Hopkins. "But they said: 'I know it all. I've seen it all. I used to go sit in my room and cry. Do you have something for me to sign?'" In August 1994, 16 senior female scientists redrafted the letter of protest and decided to send it to the dean of the School of Science, Mr. Birgeneau.

It was a relief finally to talk with other female scientists who shared her problems, Ms. Hopkins says. "It takes women years and years to be able to say, 'It's not because I'm not good enough -- it's because it wasn't fair.'"

M.I.T. released only a cursory report of the study it conducted, so it is difficult for outsiders to judge exactly what the gap was between men and women. The institute agreed to make the study public only if details of the discrimination were omitted. Even today, the female professors refuse to disclose information comparing their salaries or treatment to that of male colleagues. The report reached general conclusions, finding that there was a "glass ceiling" in many science departments, and that compared with men, women were paid lower salaries, given smaller laboratories and less desirable teaching assignments, and were less likely to be included on major committees.

The discrimination amounted to "many small factors that work slightly

against women and accumulate over time, so that a little less ends up eventually being a lot less," explains Molly C. Potter, a professor of psychology and a member of the gender committee.

Part of the problem, says Hazel Sive, an associate professor of biology, has to do with a difference in style between men and women. "Science," she says, "is a very aggressive profession, and women are not as aggressive as men. It's biological."

Female professors here say women are not as likely as men to engage in self-promotion, and as a result often lose out. For instance, professors at M.I.T. who receive offers from elsewhere are frequently rewarded with generous counter-offers. But women tend to be less likely than men to use such an outside offer to lobby for a pay raise, says Paola M. Rizzoli, a professor of physical oceanography who came here in 1981. "The real solution is to change the system," she says. "Good salesmen are not always top scientists."

Not all professors here agree that the treatment of male and female scientists has significantly differed. However, it is pretty difficult for those in disagreement to speak out, now that the president and the dean have acknowledged that discrimination exists.

June L. Matthews, a professor of physics who has worked at M.I.T. for 27 years, was the only tenured woman in the School of Science who refused to sign the letter of complaint to the dean in 1994. She did sit on the committee that looked into gender discrimination, but says her personal experience doesn't jibe with its findings. "I have never felt marginalized," she says in an interview. "There was a lot of hype and hysteria on that committee. Some of it was well-founded, and some of it was not." She eventually asked to be removed from the panel. "When they got into gripe sessions," she says, "I felt I had something better to do with my time."

Daniel Kleitman, a professor of mathematics, sat on the gender committee and "never saw any evidence" that women in the School of Science had been discriminated against. "There was no conclusion that anything was wrong," he says. Still, he agrees that women at M.I.T. were unhappy with their careers, and he thinks it was the dean's job to do something about it.

"I'm not sure that what the women were experiencing was unique to women," he says. "But the dean wanted them to feel better, so when they said, 'Shouldn't our salaries be more?,' he said, 'Okay,' and gave them raises."

Most female scientists at M.I.T. chalk such comments up to the fact that men just don't understand. A few who apparently do, however, were on the gender committee. Jerome I. Friedman, a professor of physics, supported the women. "We have to make people more sensitive to the plight of anybody who's within a small group inside a larger group," he

says. "They have to be treated with additional care to make sure they feel welcome."

Meanwhile, Ms. Hopkins and the study at M.I.T. seem to have touched a nerve with female academics around the country, many of whom are clamoring for her to visit their institutions. So far, she has given lectures on 18 campuses, with more scheduled.

In her talks, Ms. Hopkins attributes her success to a group effort. No individual woman, she says, can accomplish anything by complaining about discrimination. The facts and figures in any one case can always be explained away by individual circumstances. But no dean can ignore his entire staff of female professors.

Deans and presidents on more than a few campuses seem to be listening. When Ms. Hopkins spoke last month at Harvard Medical School, the dean for faculty affairs announced that, for the first time, the school would complete a "salary-equity review" of its clinical professors. "Women faculty were startled by the awareness that M.I.T., a nearby respected institution, would find a persistent problem," says Eleanor G. Shore, the medical school's dean for faculty affairs. "That added to our sense that this would be an appropriate time to do this."

On many campuses, presidents have feared that acknowledging discrimination might set the college up to be sued. They have also been leery of assigning committees to look into gender bias and giving them data on salary and benefits, because the university might have to find the money to resolve any inequities that are discovered.

Peter Likins, president of the University of Arizona, says M.I.T. made it possible for him to endorse a study of gender discrimination on his campus without being publicly second-guessed. "Because M.I.T. is an institution of such unquestionable intellectual and academic distinction, I could, in advocating a study of this kind, avoid the allegation that issues of academic excellence were being set aside in order to deal with social equity," he says.

Female professors at Arizona have come up with an ambitious plan called the Millennium Project, to study conditions for all female professors on the campus. Naomi J. Miller, an associate professor of English who is president of the Association for Women Faculty there, is helping to design the study with Myra Dinnerstein, a professor of women's studies. "For a long time, it seemed that even though studies were done about women, nothing ever changed," says Ms. Miller. "But because of what M.I.T. has done, and because our president was supportive, we could possibly effect change here."

Susanne Lohmann, a professor of political science at U.C.L.A., thinks the M.I.T. study gave a welcome nudge to administrators on her campus, too. She had asked officials to look into gender inequity for years. Finally, last May, the vice-chancellor for academic personnel

said he would create a panel to do just that. "You have to imagine that U.C.L.A. is like a tanker, and for a tanker to change direction it really takes a hell of a lot of push," says Ms. Lohmann. M.I.T.'s report, she says, helped persuade the vice-chancellor, Norman Abrams, that "he cannot afford to be seen not doing anything anymore." Mr. Abrams did not return telephone calls.

Professors at M.I.T. have even heard rumors that women at other institutions have been called into their dean's office, given a raise -- and told that it has nothing to do with what went on at M.I.T.

Even if those stories are apocryphal, the change wrought by the M.I.T. study is simply amazing to Ms. Hopkins, who says the women on her campus "were only trying to fix our own problems." Quiet, with a self-deprecating sense of humor, she admits to feeling a bit embarrassed about being a national poster child for gender bias. She never expected to find herself leading a revolution.

Although the M.I.T. study has been important to a lot of women, she can't help wondering what it will ultimately mean for her own career.

"I think I'm going to pay a huge price for this," she says in one of her less confident moments. "I fear that I will never be known as a great scientist who did it on her own. I'll be known for this."

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