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Fair Play

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I SU professor Carolyn Heising knows what it's like to be the odd woman out. A professor of industrial, mechanical and nuclear engineering, Heising says she joined the male-dominated field because of her father, who was an engineer.

As the first female nuclear engineering professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she tried to fit in by dressing and acting as professionally as possible, but it still didn't give her an edge with her male coworkers. Women were still an anomaly—there was no doubt about it—you were an outsider, she says.

There's also no doubt in Heising's mind that conditions have improved immensely for women faculty in the past few decades. Heising may have been the first female in her department, but she never thought of herself as being a pioneer for women in her field. Women's studies courses didn't even exist while she was in college. Recently, she has learned more about gender equity by sitting in on women's studies courses. You look back on history and say, 'How did we get where we are?'

So if gender equality among faculty has improved so much for professors such as Heising, what's the big deal? The women's movement has given the women of today the same opportunities as men, right? Wrong.

Women may have joined universities and the work force in droves, but now they are expected to bring home their share of the bacon and fry it up in the pan. And some say Iowa State University does little to make women's dual roles easier.

Equality by the Numbers
Getting ISU officials to talk about faculty gender equity is about as easy as pulling teeth. Officials from the Office of Institutional Research told me they couldn't give me any more statistics than one page in the 2000-2001 ISU Fact Book—since gender, age and race are confidential. Before giving me this data, they needed to know my name and why I wanted the information. They sent me out the door to get official comments from Provost Rollin Richmond. At his office, I was told that he probably wouldn't have time to answer my questions. Luckily, his assistant Brenda Behling did.

Although the facts are few, they are revealing. Just 10 percent of ISU's full professors are women, Heising says. Women make up 30 percent of the ISU faculty, but only 21 percent of the tenured faculty, according to the Fact Book. Behling said these numbers are slowly creeping up. "This is a demographic situation that has taken time to improve," she says.
"I don't think equity is the goal of very many faculty and administrators."

Eugenia Farrar, ISU associate professor of zoology and genetics

The number of ISU women faculty may be rising, but unequal pay for male and female faculty persists. The average pay increase for female faculty was one-tenth of a percent higher than the men's mean, according to the Office of Institutional Research. When women were compared to men of the same rank in the same department, assistant professors of both genders were paid equally, but full female professors were given 97 percent of what their male counterparts earned. Female associate professors' pay checks were an average of 4 percent lower than their male equals. This comparison excluded non-tenure positions, where women fill almost half of the jobs.

Behling says ISU administrators want to hire more females and minorities because the diversity would benefit students as they are taught and advised. The university has tried to attract women by expanding the family-leave policy and providing a spousal accommodations program. But not everyone thinks those efforts are effective. "I don't think equity is the goal of very many faculty and administrators," says Eugenia Farrar, ISU associate professor of zoology and genetics.

More female role models are needed at universities to show young women they can succeed, Farrar says. Today at ISU, 44 percent of the students are women, but faculty ratios don't match up, especially in some fields. In 2000, 41 percent of ISU chemical engineering students were female but only 12 percent of their professors shared their gender. When Farrar was an undergrad in the '60s, she didn't have a single female model. "You felt as if you weren't sure you could do it," she says. Farrar thinks female faculty are especially important at the graduate level, when networking is a must, and women faculty and students tend to connect. She says if female faculty aren't given equal treatment, their abilities to serve as educators, researchers and positive role models may be hindered.

The Juggling Act

Unconscious gender discrimination is the biggest obstacle in the path to equity, Heising says. "There are feminists who are men, and there are women who are sexist," she says, adding that many females are not aware they sometimes contribute to the problem. She recalls hearing a female engineering professor scold her pregnant secretary for leaving the office too often to go to the bathroom during her last trimester. She also thinks men are threatened by successful women. "If a woman is a superstar, older men think it makes them look bad. They're jealous," Heising says.

Part of the reason some women faculty are kept so busy is that they struggle to maintain a household while keeping a full-time job. "Balancing work and family only comes up in women's discussions," Heising says. She also points out the prime years of childbearing are the best years for starting a career. Farrar agrees. "It's hard to find the perfect time to have a child," she recounts. She finished her thesis the two days each week when her daughter attended nursery school and stayed at home until she started kindergarten. At this time, Farrar decided to only have one child because she wanted to go back to work. As the wife of a professor, she also didn't think they could have more than one child without one of them staying at home.

Farrar says that when she and her husband were both graduate students, they shared the housework equally. She took over the cooking, cleaning and bill-paying when she wasn't working, but when she returned to teaching she kept these responsibilities. "It bugs me," she says, "but it's hard to change old ways." Heising has tried to simplify her life by living in a small condo and by hiring help whenever possible. She has used day care centers and nannies and often goes to restaurants. She says her second husband has shared a large portion of their family and home responsibilities. The flexibility of her position as a full professor has also been a great help.

Supporting families is one area where universities can help working parents, Farrar says, by providing affordable childcare and by providing jobs to faculty spouses. Farrar says there is more day care available today but it is still costly. Heising is disappointed that recent budget cuts delayed improvements to ISU's childcare program. "Where does the money go?" she asks. "This is all so dysfunctional!" Farrar believes that spousal accommodations are a good way to get women and minorities into faculty positions, although these arrangements are costly. She says having more positions like these as well as desirable jobs that are flexible would be very beneficial to families.

A group of ISU female faculty recently participated in a panel discussion in Farrar's Women in Science and Engineering class. They discussed the importance of female role models, the challenges of balancing family and work, and the need for spousal accommodations at universities.
were there to answer questions about balancing work and family. Several of them shared how they dealt with taking time off for pregnancies. Their stories varied, but they all agreed on one thing: They were hesitant to miss work when they had their children. "It was very difficult to take that time and not feel guilty," one mother recalls. "I was worried about what my colleagues would think," another says. Unfortunately, ISU does not provide a clearly defined maternity leave. If the university did, perhaps women wouldn't have to worry about others thinking they were taking advantage of their situation. Pregnant faculty can use their sick leave and vacation days or take time off without pay. Upon request, they can have one year added to their "tenure clock" to make up for halts in their careers due to family responsibilities.

Even if these changes are made, it will be a long time before the playing field is level. "It's not easy to take the road less traveled," Heising says. "You have to be a fighter. ... You have to have a will to survive."

Ruth Hitchcock is a senior in biology. She wrote "Left Out" for the October issue of Ethos.

Factors that May Contribute to Gender Inequities in Science and Engineering Professions (NSF 2000)

Age
Women are younger on average

Education
Females often have lower levels of educational attainment

Hours
More women work part time, often due to family responsibilities

Occupation
Females are less likely to be in high-paying fields like engineering and computer science