

House Panel Hears Ideas on Increasing Number of Women on Science and Engineering Faculties

By JJ HERMES

Several higher-education leaders testified before Congress on Wednesday on the continuing underrepresentation of women in tenured faculty positions in science and engineering, outlining the existing barriers and biases. The proposals they put forth included the creation of an NCAA-style organization to monitor the hiring practices of academic departments and urge them to comply with federal laws banning gender discrimination.

Rep. Brian Baird, a Democrat of Washington who is the chair of the House Subcommittee on Research and Science Education, said that Wednesday's hearing would be the first of many on increasing the involvement of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or the STEM disciplines.

Rep. Vernon J. Ehlers of Michigan, who is the subcommittee's senior Republican member, expressed the tone of the hearing. "Higher education must change both the culture and structure of its institutions so that obstacles to women advancing in science and engineering are removed," said Mr. Ehlers, who is a former chair of the physics department at Calvin College.

None of the experts who testified on Wednesday disputed that women were struggling to gain a foothold in science-faculty positions, and they illustrated the problem with some sobering statistics.

Kathie L. Olsen, deputy director of the National Science Foundation, said that "women have earned 23 percent of the doctoral degrees in the physical sciences since 1997, yet held only 14 percent of academic physical-science faculty positions in 2003."

Myron Campbell, chair of the physics department at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, added that the figure was even worse in his field, where less than 5 percent of full professors are female.

Turning to Existing Law

One proposal the witnesses broached was to use Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 as a means of holding universities accountable for their hiring practices.

"That's something Congress can clearly fix," said Donna E. Shalala, president of the University of Miami and a former U.S. secretary of health and human services.

Title IX, which bars gender discrimination at institutions that receive federal funds, is best known for fostering more opportunities for women to participate in athletics, but the law also applies to academic programs.

Ms. Shalala even floated a proposal to create an organization like the National Collegiate Athletic Association that would oversee Title IX compliance in the STEM disciplines. But no one at the hearing discussed the structure of such an organization, whether participation in it would be voluntary, or what its relationship to federal antidiscrimination enforcement efforts would be.

"The solution is to designate the sciences as a sport," joked Representative Ehlers. "There would be two advantages: First, NCAA rules would apply, but secondly, we'd also share in the football revenues."

The witnesses emphasized that several federal agencies that support academic science should get more involved in monitoring Title IX compliance, including the National Science Foundation, NASA, and the National Institutes of Health.

Those agencies said last year that they were investigating Title IX compliance in science and engineering departments ([The Chronicle](#), January 20, 2006), but Mr. Campbell said the effect of a recent NASA audit at Michigan "was almost nothing."

He added, however, that Title IX enforcement may not provide the answer. "I think it is a much subtler problem that has to do with climate, and it does not have to do with a flagrant violation of the law."

Gretchen Ritter, director of the Center for Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, proposed expanding the NSF's Advance initiative, which offers grants focused on including more women and members of minority groups on science faculties. The program's annual budget is about \$20-million. The witnesses also suggested family-friendly changes in institutional policies, including stopping the tenure clock for faculty members with new children and providing a child-care allowance for scholars who bring their children to conferences.

The testimony was delivered before several members of the House panel. All of the members in attendance on Wednesday were male, and most had earned advanced degrees. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, Democrat of Texas, was unable to attend the hearing because of the death of her mother. She has introduced the Gender Bias Elimination Act of 2007 ([HR 3514](#)), which carries many of the recommendations discussed at the hearing.

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