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## **WOMEN FACULTY OF COLOR: NUMBERS ARE LOW AND NOT INCREASING, BUT HOPE RESTS IN NEW STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

The numbers of women of color on academic faculties in the United States are very small and not increasing. There are even fewer such professors in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields. And the implications of this deficit are far-reaching, researchers suggest.

But some strategies for improvement exist at both the individual and institutional levels, and therein lies the hope that Georgia Institute of Technology Associate Professor of Public Policy Cheryl Leggon delivered to her audience at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting in Seattle. Leggon spoke as part of a panel discussion titled “Nearly Invisible: Experiences of Minority Science Faculty in Mainstream Institutions” on February 15.

“The numbers are grim across the board for males and females of color,” Leggon said. The situation has not improved much in the past decade. There have been only miniscule increases in faculty – especially women – of color in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, Leggon notes.

She cites several implications of these statistics. First is the effect of this deficit on students.

“The United States is becoming more diverse, and that is somewhat reflected in the student population in colleges and universities, but nowhere in the faculty population,” explained Leggon, a sociologist. “That is

problematic. What kind of message does it send to students? The implicit message is, ‘You can’t do this.’ The absence of these groups does send a message.”

Leggon cites two other important reasons to increase diversity among STEM faculty. “It significantly enhances the quality of



*Cheryl Leggon*

scientific research insofar as it expands the pool from which the United States draws its science talent,” she said. “And it improves the quality of the educational experience for all students.”

To improve conditions for women and men of color in the STEM

fields in academia, strategies could be employed at both the individual and institutional levels, Leggon says.

At undergraduate level, students should be informed about the range of opportunities they might have with a degree in a particular field. “For example, if you have biology majors

from an underrepresented group, they are probably only thinking of a career in medicine,” Leggon said. “They don’t usually think of a research career in academe.”

If undergraduate students do indicate an interest in a career in academe, it’s important they know how to select a graduate school. “They shouldn’t apply to an institution just because of its overall reputation,” Leggon explained. “They should take into account the reputation of the specific department, program and faculty with whom they would like to work.”

For junior faculty members, particularly in underrepresented groups, administrators must make clear the criteria for getting tenure, Leggon says.

“Committee work is time-consuming and does not substitute for publications,” she added. “Also, because there are so few women faculty of color, students of color gravitate toward you. Again as a junior faculty member, you have to be careful it’s not all-consuming. Sometimes, it’s difficult to make that judgment. It’s a dilemma because junior women of color are so passionate about mentoring. But to make the greatest impact in the long run, you have to get tenure first so you’ll be here later.”

Strategies to improve conditions for women of color and other underrepresented groups must also exist at an institutional level, Leggon says.

“You can’t depend on the good will of a few people,” she added. “I can’t emphasize enough the importance of institutionalizing policies. If something is standard operating procedure, then it’s one of the criteria on which performance is evaluated.”

Programs such as the National Science Foundation’s ADVANCE program for women faculty development are designed to transform institutional culture, Leggon says. At Georgia Tech, the ADVANCE program has sponsored sessions on how to get tenure, establish a research agenda and get published.

“We need programs like this within a given institution and, secondly, across institutions -- like in consortia,” Leggon said. “Increasing faculty diversity benefits not only one college or university, but the entire society.”

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