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Gender Equity Project

Executive Summary for Panel 3:
Developing a Gender Equity Framework

The National Science Foundation is, in effect, conducting a large informal experiment via its ADVANCE funding, investigating how to reach the goal of gender equity in the natural and social sciences. The task of social scientists is to develop hypotheses and models that will explain the results achieved at ADVANCE and other schools, using as data both the formal information presented in annual and quarterly reports to NSF and less formal observations that seldom make their way into official documents. Our aim is to understand when and why some strategies have worked and others have not, using social science data, concepts, and theory to provide explanations.

A group of 8 ADVANCE schools (6 from cohort 1 and 2 from cohort 2) attended a mini-meeting in December. We identified 3 issues to concentrate on in addition to benchmarks: 1) leadership; 2) attitude and behavior change; 3) institutionalization and sustainability. Each issue will have a team that will take the lead, initially performing semi-structured interviews, primarily by telephone, of appropriate representatives from all schools – ADVANCE and non-ADVANCE – that wish to participate.

This summary concentrates on leadership and draws on the mini-meeting discussion. Leadership is necessary at all organizational levels: the department, the institution, the discipline, the funding agencies. There are at least three directions of leadership (top-down, bottom-up, lateral), each of which we need to understand.

Top-down leadership alone is not sufficient to create lasting change. If changes are identified as due to a single person or small group of people, the changes are at risk of reverting to status quo ante when that person leaves. One example is the loss of the impressive gains that were made at the Johns Hopkins Department of Medicine when the department chair left the university. Nevertheless, people in official leadership positions – chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents – have power. Interestingly, despite their positions of power, administrators often portray themselves as helpless. *They* want to make changes, but those above or below them do not.

Some tips are available from the leadership literature: leaders are more effective when they articulate clear goals, justifications for those goals, and plans for reaching those goals. Part of our job is to provide leaders with what they need, and particularly to provide a small number of “next-action” suggestions that are transparently linked to the goals. If the job looks too difficult, people will not be willing to take it on. If it looks doable and has immediate effects, people will be more interested in it. For example, schools with vacant named chairs can quickly increase the percentage of women in those chairs.

Leaders need a circle of advisors to prevent isolation and ignorance of institutional issues and problems. At Hunter College, we have realized that we know more about many aspects of the college than anyone else does. We are in touch with the president, the provost, deans, department chairs, support offices like human resources, facilities, and information technology, as well as individual faculty, both male and female. As we talk to different members of the community, we see how many issues never make their way to the top. Conversely, many administrative goals and intentions never make their way to the faculty.

We thus recommend replacing the notion of a mentor with the notion of having a circle of advisors. The literature is now replete with mentions of a “composite mentor”, “mosaic mentor”, and so on, reflecting the facts that a) no single person can (or should) fulfill every need and b) each person needs to take an active role in defining his or her needs and searching for the best people to get advice and support from. For our purposes, a major problem with the word “mentor” is that it suggests that one will outgrow such a person. But one never outgrows one’s need for constructive advice and criticism. ADVANCE teams can help provide that advice and criticism as part of administrators’ circles of advisors.

At the lateral level, we have a role to play within our departments and within professional groups. For example, we can help individual faculty learn how to organize and ally with others to promote change, how to respond helpfully in faculty meetings and other places where women are less likely than men to be heard or attended to. Many ADVANCE schools have developed workshops for faculty to learn how organization works and how to be effective within it. At the same time, we recognize that women and men are not monolithic blocks: race, class, age, and sexual orientation affect people’s understanding of what kind of development is desirable and how it should take place.

Within our professional groups, we can provide suggestions for next actions: program committees can immediately increase the number of invited women speakers to ensure that the number will reflect the proportion of women in the discipline. Some societies already do this. We can help make accomplished women visible by nominating them (or asking others to nominate them) for prestigious awards.

Finally, undergraduates, graduate students, and post-docs are our great untapped resource. Faculty are committed to the success of their students and post-docs; they want their students to continue in academia and thus will be positively disposed to follow thoughtful suggestions from students. The literature suggests that people are more likely to accede to requests from people they know and feel positively toward. We can teach leadership strategies to students and post-docs so that they will be more effective and, hence, more likely to remain in academia. If students see that they can effect change, they will be more likely to see academia as a place where they can thrive.