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Panelists Offer Strategies for Raising the Number of Women Scientists in Academe

By [LILA GUTERMAN](#)

Placing women in leadership roles and making rational hiring decisions are vital to helping female engineers and scientists receive equitable treatment in the academic job market, according to panelists Monday at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Warning that women's qualifications are often undervalued or overlooked in hiring and promotion, the six women and one man also recommended that panels at future meetings of the association be required to include at least one female speaker.

"It can be hard for people to understand why it's important to have women at the top," said Virginia Valian, a professor of psychology at Hunter College of the City University of New York. "It has ramifications all the way down."

Two leaders in the efforts to improve conditions for women described the successes they'd achieved at their own institutions. One was Nancy Hopkins, the driving force behind [the famous report](#) that found gender bias at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "A lot has happened" since then, she said, "and a lot remains to be done."

MIT acted quickly to fix inequities on a case-by-case basis, increasing the salaries, laboratory space and resources, and pensions of many women and even some men, she said. "This was an easy thing to fix," she said. Attacking the sources of the disparities has been less simple. She is a co-chair of a new council on faculty diversity that is reviewing hiring guidelines, family-work policies, and issues involving what many scientists referred to Monday as "the leaky pipeline," wherein more women than men drop out of careers in science and engineering at every stage. The institute has also acted to hire women in administrative positions. "There had been zero [female administrators] in science and engineering," Ms. Hopkins said. "Now there are about 10."

Denice D. Denton described how, in just a few years as dean of the college of engineering at the University of Washington in Seattle, she vastly

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increased the number of female hires simply by employing straightforward, common-sense recruitment procedures. Ms. Denton converted the processes "from sorts to searches," said Shirley Malcom, the head of the directorate for education and human-resources programs at AAAS.

Ms. Denton and other panelists lamented that they constantly hear people justifying how few women are hired by saying there aren't any in the candidate pool. It's easy to combat that argument she says: She simply shows faculty search committees current statistics about the diversity of Ph.D.'s granted in the United States. Another problem is also easily dealt with: illegal interview questions such as, "Are you planning to have children?" She simply reads them the law.

But Ms. Denton said other issues take up a large amount of her time and effort as dean. She meets with every faculty-search committee and walks them through ways of attracting high-quality candidates, regardless of gender, and of using fair and logical criteria for selection of new faculty members. She also meets with every finalist for jobs in engineering as part of making the interview process "a magnet" to bring good people to the engineering school.

As a result, Washington hired 22 new engineering faculty members in 2001, 7 of them women. In contrast, from 1995 to 2000, the University of California at Berkeley hired 1 woman and 48 men. "The thing I would really emphasize is *my* involvement," she said. Faculty and job candidates pick up on her interest in the recruitment process, she said, and the result is better hires, both male and female.

Many of the other speakers echoed that improving women's opportunities for being hired and promoted usually results in an overall improvement for a department or institution. In a now-famous study of the Swedish Medical Research Council's procedures for hiring postdocs that was published in *Nature* in 1997, Christine Wennerås and Agnes Wold discovered that women had to be two-and-a-half times as productive as men to obtain the same scores from evaluators. Only 8 percent of all women received positions, compared with 25 percent of men. Had the research council awarded postdocs to women equitably, the quality of the new hires could have increased, Alice M. Agogino pointed out.

Despite gains for women, the panelists did not present a rosy picture. Ms. Hopkins worried about marginalization of women in departments where all other faculty members were men. Ms. Agogino, chairwoman of the mechanical engineering department at Berkeley, said that despite improving the hiring process so that this year, for the first time, more women than men were hired, Berkeley's engineering college is still so dominated by men that the recent success hardly changes the overall ratio of men to women. Subtle biases will always affect people's judgments, said Ms. Valian. Still, she said, "We can train people to be better evaluators" of candidates for jobs and promotions.

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