



W I S E L I

Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute
University of Wisconsin-Madison

ADVICE TO THE TOP

Top 10 Tips for Academic Leaders to Accelerate the Advancement of Women in Science and Engineering

The power in a leader's office is one of the most essential tools to influence the campus agenda. Rarely can that power of itself be used to dictate policy or actions, but a great leader can part the way for other community members to develop and advance specific actions and policies. The environment into which the change agents introduce their agenda will determine success or failure. A campus leader can ensure success by carefully laying the groundwork. The following recommended actions are intended to create a receptive environment so that the work of committees, task forces, and other bodies of faculty and staff take hold.

TIP #1 LEARN ABOUT OUTSTANDING WOMEN ON YOUR CAMPUS

Meet with women students, scientific staff, and faculty members in diverse venues. Have monthly luncheons with small groups of women faculty, visit the labs and classrooms of women scientists, consult women who may be left out of informal networks on issues of importance to the campus. Create your own opportunities for interaction by initiating new informal networks that are more likely to include women. Seek out women of color who may be even more isolated than white women.

TIP #2 LEARN FROM THE LOCAL EXPERTS ABOUT GENDER ISSUES

Identify the 10 women on your campus whose science you most respect. Ask them for their insights into the most prevalent challenges facing women scientists on your campus. Ask them what is needed to redress the issues. Attempt to hear from a diversity of women, including those of different viewpoints, disciplines, age, or race.

TIP #3 REVIEW CAMPUS DATA ON EQUITY

Have your campus collect data on equity and study it. Ensure that pay, space, teaching assignments, desirable appointments, and other critical resources are fairly distributed. Make it well-known that you conduct such reviews and hold units accountable for addressing inequities.

TIP #4 STUDY WORK/LIFE ISSUES

Once women have identified ways in which the campus could accommodate the interface between professional and personal life, champion one or more of the solutions. These might include:

- Personally oversee the design of campus child care facilities, lactation rooms, or housing for students who are single mothers.

- Make a personal donation to a fund to support a new child care facility on campus.
- Visibly support the right of women to have careers and children in the same lifetime by advocating policies for tenure clock extensions and parental leave.
- Ensure that mandatory meetings are not held outside of the hours during which child care is available.
- Provide child care at campus events.
- Make clear to your campus community that policies designed to alleviate the pressures differentially shouldered by women are not “special treatment,” and create a better workplace for men as well as women.
- Assert that child-bearing and caring for young children only last a few years and you invest in a lifelong career.
- Point out that women are not the only ones to take time away from work for personal commitments – most of us suffer some loss of time at work at some point in our careers due to death of family members, accidental injury, prostate cancer, heart disease and many other causes.

TIP #5 MAKE GENDER ISSUES VISIBLE

Insert issues of social justice into discussions of other topics; make it clear to your campus community that gender issues affect everything that happens on campus. Be prepared to deliver certain strong messages that are appropriate to the campus. In the right context, some of the messages that may need to be stated repeatedly, especially by men, might include:

- the current status of women is not acceptable
- it is the responsibility of the entire campus community to solve the problem
- the problem is not the women, it is the institution
- the climate for women on campus is not good
- poor climate reduces productivity and creativity
- men are typically poor judges of the climate experienced by women
- diversity enhances the value of any institution by increasing creativity and problem-solving
- hiring more women does not mean sacrificing quality
- society and our universities need women who combine outstanding science and family life
- unconscious biases and assumptions are universal and need to be countered in all evaluations of women
- the campus has a zero tolerance for illegal actions such as sexual harassment, discrimination, and retaliation against those who raise these issues

Study the research that supports each of these assertions and use the data to convince colleagues that in an evidence-driven decision-making environment, you must address areas in which the evidence indicates that the university could improve to better serve all members of the community.

TIP #6 INCREASE THE VISIBILITY OF OUTSTANDING WOMEN SCIENTISTS

Use opportunities in speeches, interactions with the press, and discussions with other faculty to highlight the accomplishments of women scientists. Appoint women to important committees and positions. Ensure that women's accomplishments are covered by your campus press. Research shows that people respond more negatively to self-promotion by women than by men, so you may need to work harder to find out about women's accomplishments. Keep a list of the women faculty handy with notes about their specialties so that you are ready with suggestions when asked about nominations or appointments. Be vigilant about placing women in positions of true power and not stereotyping them, thereby further embedding prejudice. Be sure that women are presented as leaders, scientists, researchers, powerful intellects and not exclusively as students, followers, teachers, nurturers, and nice people.

TIP #7 SUPPORT COMMITTEES AND TASK FORCES

Most of the institutional change on your campus is likely to be driven by committees or task forces charged with addressing gender equity. Maximize their effectiveness by staying in close contact with them, providing them resources, supporting proposed initiatives, and taking ownership of their recommendations. Use these bodies to generate strategies and solutions, but don't expect them to take the lead on implementation. Give credit to the task forces for the ideas to show the community that the recommendations are from the community, not top-down mandates, and give credit broadly (reinforce groups and committees, not just their chairs) to enfranchise all contributors in the process. But then take full ownership of implementing the recommended changes, while continuing to remind the community that these are not your ideas, but that you are fully supportive of them. For initiatives that are centrally managed, provide leadership from the highest offices of the university to signal to the community that you consider these initiatives important.

TIP #8 ASK HARD QUESTIONS AND TAKE TOUGH STANDS

Regularly question the people who report to you, and expect them to provide concrete answers. These include:

- Which women in your unit are most likely to be recruited elsewhere?
- What are you doing to preempt such losses?
- What mechanisms do you use to ensure equitable distribution of resources?
- How do you ensure that searches to fill new positions are broad and inclusive?
- What have you done to recruit more women to your faculty?

Be ready to take hard positions if the answers are unacceptable. Get the community's attention and let them know that gender equity is a priority by terminating searches that do not generate short lists that reflect the composition of the national pool, or refuse positions or resources to departments that have poor climates and retention records for women.

TIP #9 EMBED GENDER EQUITY IN CAMPUS PROCESS

Explicitly make gender equity issues a basis on which to evaluate those who report to you. Hold your subordinates accountable for decisions that affect gender equity. Make gender equity part of the value statement and strategic plan for your university. Ensure that those who participate in gender equity efforts receive recognition and reinforcement for their work.

TIP #10 BE RECEPTIVE WHEN PRESENTED WITH GENDER ISSUES

Make it known that you are open to hearing directly from people concerned about gender issues. Respond and take action, if necessary. Even if you don't believe an allegation or agree with a conclusion about bias, show respect for the person and concern for the situation. Protect those who raise concerns about gender from retaliation for their actions. You can't create an entirely equitable campus, but you can create a climate that supports open debate without retribution to those of a minority view or class.

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