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The dean of gender equity

UCI's Sue Bryant has helped secure equal opportunities for women in academia.

By GARY ROBBINS

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Sue Bryant got a chilly response back in the early 1970s when she made a simple inquiry about UC Irvine's policy on maternity leave for faculty.

The young UCI biologist remembers being told the campus didn't have a policy and didn't need one "because faculty were only hired for nine months and could just arrange to have their babies during the summer."

The school's position set off a "slow burn" in Bryant, who soon got involved in writing UCI's first affirmative-action policy. She has since become one of the nations' best-known advocates for equity and opportunity for women in academia, particularly the sciences.

Her efforts have been most evident at UCI, where Bryant obtained a \$3.5 million federal Advance grant to promote equity. In the past three years, the percentage of women faculty recruited by the campus has doubled.

Bryant, dean of UCI's School of Biological Sciences, was recently recognized for such work by being elected a fellow of the Association for Women in Science. We've been talking to her about equity issues, and the controversy at Harvard, where President Lawrence Summers was rebuked by colleagues Tuesday for saying that women don't have the same aptitude as men in science and mathematics.

Q. What was your gut reaction to Lawrence Summers' remarks about women in science?

A. I thought his comments were inappropriate and misguided. As an economist, he has no credentials or expertise in this area, which is very complex. The research actually shows that women are as good in science and math as men. There are fewer women in the sciences, but that's mainly because of social factors such as a lack of good role models and support for women as they move through the academic pipeline.

Q. Was Summers stereotyping women?

A. Most people's mental image of a scientist or a mathematician is that of a white male. Most people's image of successful behavior in these fields is based on their observations of successful white male scientists. Women who display similar behavior are dismissed as arrogant and difficult. Women who do not are dismissed as weak.

Q. What would you say to Summers over a cup of coffee?

A. Women would like to feel welcome. You can do that by solving practical barriers to their full participation. We need high quality on-site day care and work schedules that allow parents to pick up their kids. We need opportunities to slow the tenure clock to allow faculty to start a family. All search committees should have men and women. There should be no "locker room" decision-making. And we need to expand job descriptions so that they aren't so narrow as to exclude women candidates.

There should be mentoring for all junior faculty on ways to succeed, and universities should establish a system like the one at UCI, where gender-equity advisers talk to faculty search committees about the availability of women candidates and the best ways to carry out a fair and open search.

Q. During a five-year period ending in September 2000, UCI hired 13 professors in the biosciences, all of them men. Does that seem fair or enlightened?

A. I think it was more neglect than discrimination. In most cases, there was probably little effort to do things like ensure that the pool of candidates matched the expected availability of women, little effort to write the job profile to cast a broad net, little acknowledgment of the needs of many women for help in securing positions for their partner.

Q. UCI has made a lot of progress in hiring women in the biological sciences, but there has been little or no increase in engineering and the physical sciences and only modest growth in Information and Computer Science. Why?

A. I think there has been progress in all areas. ICS already was hiring at the level of availability. The problem in engineering and physical sciences is that there are very few women in the pipeline. Women don't choose these areas for graduate school, so they are not available later for hiring. This is the reason we established gender-equity advisors in each of our schools. Each discipline presents its own set of problems to solve. In some disciplines, mentoring students into graduate school, encouraging them to think about academic careers, and providing exemplary role models is most important.

Q. What will be the cost in intellectual and social terms if schools like UCI fail to broadly increase the percentage of women faculty?

A. The actual physical conduct of science is not different for men and women. But women bring something different. They have a different life experience. They deal with things differently. I don't want to stereotype women, but the future of science will involve more collaboration and cooperation than ever. And I think women are good at that. Some men are good at that, too. But a lot of the older science was individual fiefdoms that didn't really talk to each other that much. The model for science in the future is people building teams and acting as team players and sharing credit for their work equally instead of establishing hierarchies of control and credit.