The Skidmore College Distinguished Science and Engineering Lecture Series presents:

Recruiting, Retaining, and Maintaining Women Faculty in Academic Institutions in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Harding (1991, 1994) and Macfarlane and Luzzadder-Beach (1998) summarize the case for gender equity stating that fundamentally science [any field] is improved through diversity, and that women should have opportunities and access equal to those of men. Dr. Cecily Selby, chair of the 1998 NSF Women in Science and Engineering Conference stated, "This situation is not so much a "woman problem" as it is a problem for science and engineering [all fields]; as long as women's talents and abilities are not fully used, our [academic] scientific and technical enterprises lose. Our economy is, in turn, diminished. In other words, the question now is not what universities and corporations may be willing or compelled to concede to women. It is, rather, what sort of work environments encourage "the best and the brightest" human beings in our society, regardless of their gender (or any other extraneous-to-science [any field] characteristic), to contribute to the advancement of science [or any other academic discipline]."

The "pre-tenure time crunch" for female academics represents the pressure of establishing one's career trajectory while the biological window for minimizing miscarriage and genetic defects is closing. Institutional acknowledgement of this situation, followed by implementation of equitable adjustments to accommodate this time crunch, sends a powerful message to faculty that the institution values their long-term career prospects and is willing to do what it can to ease the pressure associated with this interval. Across a 20-30 year career, increasing flexibility in the first 6-10 years may have long-term positive benefits for faculty retention and productivity.

Critical mass is not necessarily the same as gender parity (equal numbers) but it should lead to gender equity (just or fair circumstances). When the number of women in a given situation reach what has been referred to as "critical mass", issues of isolation, tokenism, and role model paucity are significantly reduced. In institutions where administrators rotate out of the faculty, high numbers of women professors deepens the pool for potential deans or provosts. Achieving critical mass, whatever absolute value that may be, is important for achieving diversity throughout the institutional hierarchy. Barriers that may limit women's success in academia may be thought of as 1) structural and 2) attitudinal. My research indicates that critical mass has a bearing on both components. Structural change,

such as meaningful childbirth and adoption policies, tenure clock adjustments, etc. may be powerful recruiting and retaining tools, but accompanying attitudinal changes are necessary for their ongoing usefulness. Using focus groups and confidential surveys in a yearlong, campus-wide study, I observed that individuals in focus groups expressed extreme viewpoints, which were strongly tempered by the survey data. The small groups were valuable in pointing out areas of individual concern, but the survey results indicated that misconceptions and perpetuated myths were not borne out by confidential responses. This was an effective process of re-orienting faculty culture and significantly reduced faculty concerns over perceptions of gender inequity. Having a critical mass of women in the institution ensured that the original concerns were taken seriously and were thoughtfully addressed.