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WEBS: Practicing Faculty Mentorship

SAMANTHA J. KATZ

More than half of the doctoral degrees in biology are earned by women. The proportion of women in postdoctoral, tenure-track, and tenured faculty positions, however, is not as large. The question is, why? WEBS—Women Evolving the Biological Sciences—is an attempt to answer that question and to change the conditions that have led to inadequate numbers of women in high-level positions.

WEBS is an annual three-day symposium aimed at helping women in the biological sciences through the critical period of transition from early career stages to tenure-track and faculty positions in academic and research settings. It is the work of three women: Claire Horner-Devine, assistant professor at the University of Washington (UW); Samantha Forde, assistant research biologist at University of California–Santa Cruz (UCSC); and Joyce Yen, program and research manager at UW's ADVANCE Center for Institutional Change (a National Science Foundation program that strives to improve the academic climate and advance women faculty in science and engineering). This joint project of UW and UCSC grew out of the personal and professional connections, needs, and experiences of Horner-Devine, Forde, and Yen.

The first WEBS symposium was held 14–17 October 2007 at the Pack Forest Conference Center near Mount Rainier, Washington. Thirty women from 27 institutions participated. A series of panel discussions and workshops with three trained facilitators and 16 women advisers from a variety of institutions helped participants learn concrete skills. The women also got tips for dealing with issues ranging from getting on the tenure track, designing a research program, and managing time to establishing a mentoring program and balancing career progression and family responsibilities. They had opportunities to build a peer network and establish mentoring relationships with senior scientists, which could prove useful for advancement in their academic careers.

According to Forde, the symposium's goal was to provide participants with the right combination of personal experience, pragmatic skills, and reflective time. The organizers hoped this would lead participants to think about themselves holistically as scientists and women, and to connect to the type of mentor (professionally and personally) that will enable them to be the type of scientist they want to be. WEBS provided an opportunity to build a national network and provided tips and tools to help individuals build networks and relationships back at their own institutions.

Martha Groom, one of six WEBS Advisory Board members, with dual appointments at UW Bothell and UW Seattle, participated in the meeting as a speaker and mentor. As a mother of twins in a dual-career household, Groom remembers her needs for mentorship and networking at the beginning of her career, as well as later when she changed jobs to an institution that was more teaching focused than research focused. "There are a variety of potential career options for faculty in biology, whether it be at smaller teaching institutions, in journalism, at nonprofits, [or] at research institutions," she said. "Good scientists are needed in all places and positions, and these are not lesser choices. I wanted to provide a different lens."

Jeanine Pfeiffer is one of those women looking for a different lens. Pfeiffer, an ethnoecologist who studies how people are interconnected with their environment, sought a community as she tried to make the decision to stay in academia or go outside the box. "As someone who doesn't fit into the narrow [disciplinary] box slots of academia, the symposium was helpful," Pfeiffer said. "I took home clear, relevant examples of how to create one's own unique role in academia. Doing so may be hard to achieve, but rewarding. I think boxes are boring, anyway."

A different lens to view your career is exactly what Horner-Devine hopes to give participants. "There is a range of ways to be a woman and a scientist and be happy," she said. "By broadening your network, you can connect to the right people at your own institution as well as in the larger scientific community."

WEBS is a mechanism that can help women create their own path, whether it is a tenure-track position at a research university, a faculty position at a small teaching institution, or something nontraditional. For more information about WEBS, including upcoming events, go to *www.engr.washington.edu/advance/webs.*

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