
Regional

Women in academia facing more prejudices

In past columns I have addressed many of the issues that women face in academia. One, according to a study published last year in the journal "Science," is the general perception that they are less "smart" than their male counterparts. The other is that despite the fact that 60 percent of postdoctoral students – the main pipeline for college professors – are women, only 46 percent of assistant professors, the entry-level job in academia, are women. To make things sadder, this percentage is even worse at higher rankings. Only 23 percent of full professors are women. And, according to a study by the American Association of University Professors, women earn on average 10 percent less than males.

And now there is even worse news. In certain disciplines women who form part of a research team with men are considered less important to the work than their male counterparts. According to a study by Heather Sarsons, who is currently completing her dissertation at Harvard University, women are given less credit when doing collaborative work with men. That seems to be the case among economists. I suspect, based on my own observations, it is the same in many other disciplines.

Sarsons compiled data on the publication records of young economists recruited by top universities in the U.S. over the last 40 years. She found that despite the fact that women in the field publish as much as men, they are twice as likely to be denied tenure. Not only that, but she found that the female economists who enjoyed the same career success as men worked alone, which means that if they collaborated

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with male colleagues their contributions were not as appreciated as those of their male counterparts.

Her study, titled "Gender Differences in Recognition of Group Work," concluded that male and female economists are given roughly equal credit for work they perform alone, but in group work, women receive far less credit.

Obviously, when a female economist writes a paper on her own, there is no question about who deserves the credit and each additional solo research paper raises the probability of getting tenure by about 8 or 9 percent, according to Sarsons. Thus, the career benefit from publishing a solo paper is about the same for women as it is for men. The problem, according to this study, is that men, unlike women, also get just as much credit for collaborative research, and there is no statistical difference in the career prospects of male authors of individually written papers and those of papers written as part of a research team.

Further, when women write with co-authors, the benefit to their career prospects is much less than half that accorded to men. Women get full credit, in terms of earning tenure, only when writing papers with other women. Writing one with a man has no impact on the female author, only the male. Hence, teamwork does not work for women.

This is particularly a matter of concern in academia

where the proportion of co-authored papers has been increasing over time in all fields. The reason is very simple. More and more problems require an interdisciplinary perspective and that is why you need more than one author to bring in her or his own perspective.

How to solve this problem? Obviously misogyny – as well as racism – is widespread in academia despite accusations by outsiders that higher education suffers from too much political correctness. While that might be true when it comes to public perceptions, my own experience is that such is not the case when it comes to reality.

One of the steps colleges and universities can take to diminish the negative impact of sexism in academia is to make sure that both search and tenure and promotion committees have equal representation regarding gender. That should create an environment where at least overt sexism can be avoided.

Another step is for peer-reviewed periodicals to make sure that authors are mentioned in strict alphabetical order, creating at least the impression that contributions among different authors are equally important. Further, if the contributions were unequal in terms of efforts by the authors, to be explicit about that. This is a step that has been taken by many professional journals in the areas of natural sciences and sociology.

Of course, another alternative for administrators and colleagues would be to push female junior faculty to publish as sole authors. Of course, that would be very unfair to them. First, the loss of opportu-

nities of collaboration with their male counterparts will damage not only the chances to advance their careers by closing doors to interesting interdisciplinary research, but also by diminishing opportunities for widespread networking within academia.

If one of the final goals of academia is to create an atmosphere in which the best ideas thrive, then higher education has to become "gender blind" when it comes to the evaluation of the contributions of its members.

Finally, let's not forget that in addition to all the obstacles women in academia face, women have to deal with other issues, such as sexual harassment (more common in certain disciplines such as philosophy or astronomy) as well as those directly linked to biology. Unlike Scandinavian and other European countries which have very supportive policies regarding maternity leave (and even paternity leave to help support young mothers), the U.S. has virtually no national policies in that regard. Even in cases when colleges and universities have policies to delay the "tenure clock" because of maternity, pregnant women face peer-pressure to come back to work as soon as possible since that may affect not only their scholarly output but also their students' evaluations which are always an important part of their tenure portfolio.

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