

October 2013
Overview of Women in Science Distinguished Professor.

History of and rationale for this award:

Women in Science Distinguished Professor:

Life, Natural, Engineering, and Social Sciences

In 2012, Montana State University received an ADVANCE-Institutional Transformation grant from the National Science Foundation. These grants are aimed at broadening, supporting, and recognizing the participation of women faculty in the male-dominated fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) and the social and behavioral sciences (SBS). Montana State University has therefore established the *Women in Science Distinguished Professor* award to support and recognize our outstanding women faculty in these fields.

We are pleased to call for nominations for this Women in Science Distinguished Professor Award. **This award honors outstanding faculty women in the sciences who have excelled in their research accomplishments, teaching and mentorship, and contributions to the state of Montana and/or Montana State University.** Nominations will be made by departments without the participation of the nominees and, to the extent possible, without their knowledge. The faculty member chosen for the Distinguished Professor Award will receive an annual award of \$4,000 for 2 years. The winner will be required to give one public lecture on the value and contribution of diversity to their scholarship and experiences and will serve as a voice and role model for others on campus via participation in one or two panel discussions and workshops each year for two years.

Some questions and answers regarding the award:

Q: What is the history of this award?

There are a number of awards at MSU that recognize gendered dimensions of academic life (the Women's Faculty Caucus Distinguished Mentor Award, the Betty Coffey Award, and the President's Commission on the Status of University Women Awards). All these awards are important and respected. However this

is a research institution, and historically the high-status (and higher paying) research awards go overwhelmingly to male faculty members. The Women in Science Distinguished Professor award is intended to be an award on par with distinctions such as the Regents Professorship. This means that this award holds for multiple years, has a substantial cash prize attached to it, and carries a public outreach component through which the Distinguished Professor is the “face” of this institution and this issue during the time they hold the position.

Until this month, no woman from MSU had ever been named a Regents Professor, and only one woman at UM has received this highest distinction. Only two women (Dr. Susan Kollin and Dr. Mary Murphy) have ever won the MSU Letters and Science Distinguished Professorship. The Women in Science Distinguished Professor award is aimed at rewarding and recognizing an outstanding scientist who is also a woman that has contributed not only to her discipline, but also as a role model for women students and faculty alike.

Q: Why does the name of the award have to mention gender?

You might ask, does having the word “Women” in the title diminish the award? Shouldn’t it just be an award for a “science professor”? At first glance this seems very reasonable. Indeed, there was a time when feminists worked hard to be “treated like a man” in terms of rights, recognition and access. But ask yourself why putting the word “woman” in front of something would be seen as marginalizing or somehow diminishing the prestige of the award. We believe that this question itself suggests that stereotypes still exist about gender. A recent Yale University study showed just this: when faced with identical resumes – identical *except* for the first name of the applicant – men and women scientists alike judge the resume with the female name as lower quality. This is not research from the 1970’s but from 2012.

Taking gender out of the conversation and asking to be “treated like a man” in an effort to succeed was once the only strategic approach. But now, in the era of the next generation, ignoring or downplaying gender and persisting gender disparities can limit progress. Indeed, “gender neutral” does not mean “gender equal.” And as much social science research shows, a color-blind (or gender blind) approach makes talking about diversity feel taboo and can isolate people who are less socially privileged. Although well meaning, the sentiment that one “doesn’t see gender” or that “gender is irrelevant” can lead to minimizing very real gendered experiences and, as research shows us, make it difficult to see discrimination when it happens.

Consider this: would we ask "Can't we fight racism without talking about race? Can't we just treat people like equals?" When policies, practices and communities strive to be gender blind or race blind they tend to miss how implicit bias functions to perpetuate very subtle, but very corrosive discrimination. This is why ADVANCE has done so many presentations on implicit and unintended bias over the past year to enhance cultural

attunement. Acknowledging that we all have learned the stereotypes and norms and must make concerted efforts to overcome their influence is one way to combat the effects of these biases.

Q: How will this award serve women in science?

This Women in Science Distinguished Professor award is intended to recognize an excellent scientist who is a beacon of admiration at the university, but also a woman who is comfortable reaching out to a younger generation of women and minority scientists to talk openly about the role of gender, access and equity in scientific disciplines, as well as the crucial problem of the leaky pipeline. Gender matters in science. If avoiding the topic of gender were the solution, we would have solved the problem by now. As detailed in this recent *New York Times* piece <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/magazine/why-are-there-still-so-few-women-in-science.html> women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics disproportionately leave *at every transition* from undergraduate to graduate to post-doc to junior faculty and on up the ranks. Right now, at MSU there are 17 women in STEM/SBS who are full professors compared to 141 men. Overall, there are 42 women full professors at MSU compared to 205 men. Why the huge disparity? We can't figure it out unless we talk about gender.

What we hear on campus, and read about in media coverage of women in STEM, is that young women scientists today are actively interested in having women scientists as role models who will step forward and talk about being women scientists. This may not always have been the case, for good reasons: social science tells us that no one wants to be seen as a victim. We are a culture that emphasizes the "Just World" whereby good things happen to good people who work hard and bad things happen to bad people. This sense of justice gives people a strong feeling of control over their lives. So, it is challenging to draw attention to the invisible privileges of one group or the subtle biases against another – that would suggest that some people are rewarded or overlooked not on their merits, but by things outside of their control. But let's be real here: academia is not a pure meritocracy. From mentoring and networking to letters of recommendation and hiring practices, gender matters. Women undergraduate and graduate students, post-docs and junior faculty often express a strong desire to build a supportive community with other women scientists – those who will not talk about *whether* a woman can have a family and a scientific career, but *how*; not *whether* work-life balance is possible, but what is being done to actively foster it; not *whether* implicit biases against women in science persist, but *how* to recognize and confront them. Confronting these issues directly is seen as a sign of strength and leadership, and the only way the culture of the sciences will shift toward inclusivity and equity. The Women in Science Distinguished Professor is poised to be a key part of transforming culture at MSU, by helping the next generation of science dynamos build confidence, community and connections. This leader will be part of encouraging women to thrive, not just survive.