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Canada's Billion-Dollar Controversy

A major attempt to attract research stars has netted few women, leading to charges of bias

By KAREN BIRCHARD

When Laura Nilson, working as a postdoctoral student at Princeton University three years ago, accepted a position to set up her own laboratory in the biology department at McGill University, she discovered that the Montreal institution had also nominated her for a Canada Research Chair -- part of a billion-dollar federal program to increase world-class research in Canadian universities.

"I was thrilled, especially when I got it," says Ms. Nilson, who was awarded a chair in genetics two weeks after arriving in Canada to become an assistant professor at the university. "There was also money available for graduate students in my lab, and that helped with their recruitment. ... I'm surprised it's not better known outside Canada."

The Canadian government hopes increased awareness of the program will attract more people like Ms. Nilson, and not only because of her stellar academic record.

The program, which started in 2000, was designed to reverse the country's brain drain, attract international researchers to Canada, and restore prestige to the nation's public universities by creating 2,000 research chairs. But those goals have been overshadowed by a more controversial outcome: Of the more than 1,000 chairs awarded so far, only 17 percent have gone to women, even though 26 percent of all full-time faculty members in Canada are female. That fact has angered female professors, and embarrassed universities.

"The numbers were a wake-up call," says Michèle Ollivier, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Ottawa. "It's not an attack against the people who have received Canada Research Chairs. Many of the chairs have gone to brilliant researchers. But the hiring process was not transparent."

Last February, eight prominent female researchers from universities across Canada, Ms. Ollivier among them, filed a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission, the government agency that enforces the country's antidiscrimination laws, asking for an investigation.

Although they believe old-boy networks are partly to blame for the situation, the researchers also argue that the program favors men in several ways, some of which touch on larger problems women face as they try to carve out academic careers. Most of the chairs are designated for the hard sciences and engineering, fields in which men vastly outnumber women. Fewer than one in four of the chairs are set aside for the social sciences and the humanities.

"The chairs, from the very beginning, have been skewed in favor of patentable research," says Wendy Robbins, a professor of English and women's studies at the University of New Brunswick and one of the researchers who filed the complaint. "It's shocking and a slap in the face that only 20 percent of the chairs are available in studies that involve 53 percent of the professors and students at Canadian universities."

Pointing Fingers

The complaint criticizes Industry Canada, the government agency that is financing the Canada Research Chairs Program. The professors argue that the paucity of women in the chairs filled so far -- the government plans to fill all 2,000 chairs by 2005 -- is proof that the government has failed to carry out its own antidiscrimination laws.

But government officials say that they simply approve the appointments, and that the selection process is otherwise handled by the universities themselves. René Durocher, head of the program, is himself angry at how the selections have been made. "The universities must change their approach," he says. "The figures are just not acceptable."

Critics of the program say that conflicts were inevitable, given how it was set up. Each university was given the freedom to decide how to search for and nominate candidates. As a result, the process varies from institution to institution. Some universities advertised widely for the positions, while others relied on networking and nominations from faculty members, leading to charges of a boys-club approach to the process.

"The program is designed from the top down," says Ms. Robbins, currently a visiting scholar in gender issues at the Canadian Association of University Teachers, in Ottawa. "We don't have a critical mass of women in senior administration in Canadian universities."

The emphasis on hard sciences has also troubled some academics. "When the chairs were set up, I think it reflected a political feeling at the time that there was a need to do something to improve the sciences," says Doug Owram, president of the Canadian Federation for the Social Sciences and Humanities. "But the low numbers of women scholars holding chairs is now a very active issue. Either the universities will start to correct the situation themselves or someone else will."

The eight complainants also argue that setting aside half of the chairs for full professors hurts women, as only 14 percent of full professors at Canadian universities are women. Further, they note that many universities took advantage of a loophole in the rules to give some of the chairs set aside for junior faculty members to full professors, further limiting opportunities for women. And they say that by limiting the junior-faculty chairs to those who received their doctorates within the past 10 years, the program discriminates against those women who have slowed down their careers to raise children.

Accepting Blame

University administrators say they didn't give the issue of gender balance much thought during the first rounds of appointments, but plan to try harder to recruit female applicants for the next rounds.

"We were certainly embarrassed," says Gregory Kealey, vice president for research at the University of New Brunswick, who has taken over responsibility for filling future Canada Research Chairs there. The university filled its initial 10 chairs (seven of which were in the hard sciences and engineering) with nine men and one woman. "We are now giving significant emphasis to finding women and doing the utmost to raise the percentage in the second half of the program," he says.

Mr. Kealey notes, however, that some administrators balk at the idea that women need special consideration if they are to win one of the prestigious chairs. He points to an early meeting of vice presidents for research from across the country to discuss the lack of women holding the chairs: "I said, 'I have no problem with an affirmative-action program,' to which several women vice presidents said that was demeaning."

Simon Fraser University, in Vancouver, has one of the worst records for filling the chairs with a balance of men and women, having appointed only one woman among 21 chairs to date. Now the university is actively looking for women for its future chairs. John Waterhouse, vice president for academics, says he is confident that "we'll be at the national average by the end."

He points out that the university, unlike many others, gives individual departments autonomy in recruiting their staffs. "It was more a question of each department working independently, resulting in a bad outcome with regards to gender," Mr. Waterhouse says. "It wasn't an old-boys network but a case of each acting in what they perceived to be the best interests of their departments."

Despite promises of reform, some critics remain skeptical of universities' willingness to deal with the issue.

After the chair program completed an independent review, in December 2002, showing that fewer than one in six chairs filled so far had gone to women, Mr. Durocher asked the universities to submit revamped strategies that explained how they were going to nominate more women in the future. He was less than impressed when a quarter of the universities missed the May 2003 deadline. He has since posted every university's plan on the program's Web site "so the process is now transparent," he says. "Faculty can pressure their own university committee if there are objections."

Universities with better-than-average records in filling the chairs with women say they made an extra effort. At York University, in Toronto, 6 out of the 26 chairs filled so far -- or 23 percent -- are held by women. "But we want to do better," says President Lorna Marsden, who insists a file be kept detailing how every position is filled. "I read every file. The chairs situation has opened the old debate about minorities. ... I point out that it's not discrimination against white males but inclusion of all."

Some academics say that recruiting women is often enlightened self-interest, especially now that female students outnumber men at many universities. McMaster University's department of physics and astronomy has three Canada Research Chairs, two of which are filled by women.

John Berlinsky, the department head, says this is an area where women have been traditionally underrepresented. "We need to work hard to attract good women students, and having women faculty makes the hard sciences attractive to women students," he says.

Social Engineering?

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada organized a practical-strategy meeting in October, and one of the presentations came from Shirley Neuman, vice president and provost at the University of Toronto. Her university has been allocated the largest number of the research chairs in the country -- 267. Of the 138 that have been filled so far, about 20 percent went to women. Ms. Neuman pointed out, however, that in some areas the university is not doing as well as it should be when it comes to appointing women.

She suggested that all universities that are serious about recruiting women adopt a six-pronged approach that includes making lists of highly qualified women, ensuring search committees actually read the work of female candidates, staying in contact with the most promising female undergraduates, and debunking the so-called availability myth.

"I have several times been told that a brilliant woman would be unavailable for a position because she had young children," said Ms. Neuman at the meeting. "An approach to that woman turned up the information that the 'young' children were now in university. ... It pays to ask."

Ms. Neuman suggested that every university find money to pay for a "SWAT team" of respected senior academics, specially trained to counter the myths involved in recruiting women.

The academics who asked for the inquiry point out that they did not focus their concerns entirely on women.

"When we undertook the Human Rights complaint, we were clear that this was not just a gender issue but an equity issue," says Shree Mulay, director of the McGill Center for Research and Teaching on Women and an associate professor of medicine at the university. "The Canada Research Chairs do not ask for voluntary self-identification, so they do not know how they are doing with respect to all the protected groups such as people of color, disabilities, and aboriginal people. While we have not asked for affirmative action ... if the gap increases, affirmative action might be necessary."

Such talk riles those who think the research-chair program is in danger of becoming a victim of political correctness. "I haven't seen any hiring discrimination against women at Canadian schools -- and I've been looking - - since before the early '70s," says Clive Seligman, head of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship and a professor of social psychology at the University of Western Ontario.

He says that academe does not need what he calls "social engineering," especially when there is no evidence of discrimination. "My argument is not that the world is perfect, but right now in Canada ... there is not a problem for women with Ph.D.'s getting jobs," he says. "They are in demand. I don't know anybody at a Canadian university who would stand for discrimination."

Mediation talks between the academics who filed the complaint and Industry Canada, under the auspices of the Human Rights Commission, broke down in mid-November. The complaint must now go through an investigation to determine whether the commission will look further into the charges. An investigator's report will recommend that the case proceed to a hearing or that it be dismissed.

"We're extremely disappointed with the failure of the mediation process ... that there was no possibility of finding common ground," says Ms. Robbins. "We took the action because we wanted to do something to prevent a situation from getting worse. We wanted to level the playing field."

Whatever the outcome of the complaint, Mr. Durocher is optimistic that the second half of the program will bring about an improvement in the gender balance of the chairs. And he says that the program has had a positive effect on Canadian higher education over all.

"This has been a very bold thing for us to do," he says with a chuckle. "It's almost un-Canadian. We usually tend to do things by small steps first rather than taking such a big approach."

Ms. Neuman agrees, pointing out that the timing was important, given the chronic fiscal difficulties in Canadian higher education. "It's a wonderful program and it is having an enormous effect, a huge impact already, on universities," she says. "We've brought back scholars. We've hired international researchers. But the value of the CRC's will really show up in a few years' time."

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