

*The Faculty*

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## At North Dakota State, Women Are Few and Far Between

### Why does one university seem so behind the times?

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Fargo, N.D.

Linda K. Langley has been a faculty member at North Dakota State University for just five years. It is her first academic job.

But while she is still several months away from making her final bid for tenure, she finds herself in the unlikely position of being the most senior woman in the psychology department. "I suddenly feel like I'm going to be the role model without having had one myself," she says, rattling off a list of the female professors in her department who have come and gone in the past several years.

The psychology department provides an example of the revolving door for female faculty members at North Dakota State, a phenomenon that has left the campus thin on women, particularly at the top. Only 10 of the university's 156 full professors are female, and the campus is still fresh from marking a lot of firsts: The chemistry department just tenured its first female faculty member, the College of Engineering just promoted its first woman to the rank of full professor, and the university is just now considering opening a women's center — something that many institutions created 30 years ago.

Last year North Dakota State was reminded of just how far behind it is when the American Association of University Professors issued a report ranking 1,445 institutions on the basis of what proportion of their tenured faculty members are female. North Dakota State came in close to last (*The Chronicle*, November 3, 2006). Like other universities that ranked low in the AAUP report, North Dakota State enrolls a large number of students in engineering, architecture, science, and mathematics — fields that are relatively sparse in female faculty members.

"It sounds like they are living in a time warp," says Martha S. West, a law professor at the University of California at Davis who helped write the report, called "AAUP Faculty Gender Equity Indicators 2006."

At a time when recruiting women has become a top priority on many campuses, faculty members at North Dakota State cite a confluence of factors that explain why their university has been struggling just to hang on to those it already has. The harsh winters can scare off potential recruits and wear down those who decide to come here, especially if they didn't grow up in the region. And Fargo's reputation as a family-oriented community can make it a lonely place for single women, especially those with doctorates, who often look for partners with at least as much education as they have.

But clearly there are a lot of campuses in cold places with limited social scenes. What female professors here

describe as the root of the problem is a male-dominated atmosphere that can be "toxic." Female professors complain of being ignored, passed over for leadership positions, warned not to speak out or complain, and sometimes bullied by their male colleagues.

Rather than stick around, many leave if they get the chance. "A lot of us are out there very quietly on the job market," says one female associate professor, who, like some others, asked not to be named, because she fears she might be punished by administrators.

Campus officials here acknowledge that North Dakota State has not always been a place where women feel comfortable, and they want to change that. "For me, it's about our continuing to work with department leaders to help them understand women's experiences and be sensitive to them," says Sandra Holbrook, who retired as director of equity and diversity last July. She says male leaders and faculty members have not intended to create an unfriendly climate for women.

"I think that in most cases, if you told males about these comments and issues, they'd be shocked," she says. "They would say, We never meant to leave her out."

The university has been trying hard to hold on to female faculty members and to attract more. This year 19 of the university's 51 new faculty members were women. But R. Craig Schnell, the provost, acknowledges that it is an uphill battle: "It seems as soon as somebody gets hired and they get tenured, they leave."

### **Negative Publicity**

When people at North Dakota State learned that it had scraped the bottom of the AAUP's gender-equity ratings, they were surprised and embarrassed. The numbers showed that while nationwide an average of 31 percent of tenured faculty members are female, at North Dakota State the proportion was only 9.8 percent. That put it behind all but one other traditional institution, the University of Missouri at Rolla, of the 222 doctoral institutions ranked.

The university also was lower in gender equity than almost all of the master's and baccalaureate institutions in the report. The proportion of women at North Dakota State has crept up to 13 percent this year, but over all, less than a quarter — just 111 out of 477 — of its tenured and tenure-track professors are female.

The negative publicity prompted administrators to do something quickly. They decided to expand the campus's day-care center from a nine-month operation to a year-round one. Female faculty members had been asking for such a change for years. But once the AAUP report came out, the expansion was given top priority. While professors applaud the move, some say it was more about polishing the university's image than about listening to women on the campus.

North Dakota State has been slow to adopt other benefits that research institutions have put in place over the past decade as a way to attract and hold on to female faculty members. For example, while the university offers six weeks of maternity leave, none of it is paid. Some women who spoke with *The Chronicle* complained about the lack of paid

leave, saying they have felt forced to return to teaching within days or a few weeks of giving birth. At many colleges and universities, women can now take up to a semester off from teaching while receiving their full salaries.

When asked about the issue, Joseph A. Chapman, the university's president, expressed surprise. "No one has come to me and told me that's a problem," he said.

Mr. Schnell, the provost, later told *The Chronicle* that the university is working on offering paid maternity leave, and said some department chairmen already try to find ways to cover for new mothers so they can take

paid time off.

The university's stance on maternity benefits, some say, is a symbol of how out of touch administrators are with what is important to female professors. Administrators say they want to make North Dakota State a good place for women to work, but some women here believe campus leaders are not willing to do what it takes. "They are well intentioned but have never really thought about these issues," says Charlene E. Wolf-Hall, an associate professor of food microbiology.

One of the chief problems is that there are virtually no women in the top administrative ranks. North Dakota State has one female vice president — who was just appointed — and one female dean. "We need more champions," says Kathleen Slobin, who retired as a full professor of sociology in June.

It was Ms. Slobin who began trying to put women's issues on the agenda of the university in 1998, when she started a group called Women in Science, Math, Engineering, and Technology. Officially it was founded as a place for women to talk about their research, and it is open to all female faculty members, regardless of discipline. But female professors frequently use its monthly meetings to discuss their concerns and talk about how the administration is — or isn't — responding.

### **Junior-Level Burdens**

The absence of women in top jobs has put pressure on young female professors here. Many have found themselves in the uncomfortable position of shouldering responsibilities that on other campuses would be left to their senior colleagues.

Canan Bilen-Green was just an assistant professor in industrial and manufacturing engineering in 2002 when she learned about a grant program in which the National Science Foundation gives money to help colleges increase their numbers of women in science, mathematics, and engineering.

When Ms. Bilen-Green came back and told her dean about the grant, at first he asked her to take charge of the application. No more-senior women were in the College of Engineering at the time. Soon, however, Ms. Bilen-Green and the dean realized that the job was bigger than a junior faculty member could handle, and several other female professors and male administrators, from a variety of disciplines, got involved, writing the first proposal for \$3.75-million.

The proposal suggested that North Dakota State could improve its campus climate by offering gender-awareness workshops and conferences at which women could share their research with one another. The university also wanted to share the NSF grant money with senior female faculty members to support their scholarship, present papers at conferences, and develop national profiles as scholars. But the science foundation turned down the university's first application, in 2006, in part because the campus had so few senior women.

Ms. Bilen-Green and other female professors, including some who are not in science, math, or engineering, are now working on a second NSF proposal. "Change can happen from the top to the bottom," she says, "but this change has started from the bottom and has found its way to the top."

Claire Strom, an associate professor of history, is writing part of the new proposal, even though as a historian she would not benefit directly. She and other women are hoping that such a grant could make a major difference for women here. But some of them wonder why the job of bolstering the status of women has fallen to them when it is an institutional problem.

"We are the ones being affected by this," says Ms. Wolf-Hall, the microbiologist, "yet we're the ones having to fix it."

### **'Get Married'**

Many women who left North Dakota State over the past decade say changes simply weren't happening quickly enough. The university, they say, operates on an old boys' network that is reminiscent of the way the rest of academe was run 30 years ago.

Jane A. Whitmire, an assistant professor of mathematics at Eastern Oregon University, started her career in a visiting-faculty position at North Dakota State in 2005. But she turned down the university's offer of a second year in the job. She never felt that her male colleagues respected her.

"I was nonexistent," she says. "They didn't want my input at all. If I saw the chairman outside the math department, at the grocery store, he wouldn't speak to me."

The chairman did tell her, she says, about an award she could apply for from the Mathematical Association of America. But he neglected to tell her about the second part of the application process, and she missed out. "He apologized to me, but there was just a tremendous lack of support," she says.

Lynn M. Kuzma left in 1998, after just two years on the tenure track. The chairman of the political-science department was a bully, she says, who yelled at her for missing a deadline on a report. "He was ex-military and highly paternalistic," says Ms. Kuzma.

It also didn't help when one of her male colleagues, who knew she was living with a man, advised her to "get married as soon as possible." (Living with someone of the opposite sex outside of marriage was illegal in North Dakota until this year.) Ms. Kuzma considered her colleague's statement a warning that her domestic status might harm her chances of earning tenure. She got the message and left the university. She now heads the political-science department at the University of Southern Maine.

Valerie R. O'Regan took Ms. Kuzma's place in the political-science department. Her husband, Stephen J. Stambough, held a tenure-track job in the same department. It was not long, she says, before she realized that the department's chairman listened to her husband but not to her.

To attract attention to her ideas, she says, she began asking her husband to present them as if they were his own. "When he said it, the chairman would always be supportive," she recalls.

In 2003, when Mr. Stambough got a tenure-track job offer on California State University's Fullerton campus, the couple left, even though Ms. O'Regan did not have another position. She has since secured a tenure-track job at Fullerton.

The former chairman of the political-science department declined to comment on the accusations by Ms. Kuzma and Ms. O'Regan.

Although some female professors stay in Fargo to make their careers, they aren't necessarily happy about it. By the time she left last June, after 16 years, Ms. Slobin was one of a handful of senior faculty women at the university. But she never felt like a "full participant" in the sociology department except when she chaired it, from 2003 to 2006. Few male professors, she says, consulted her or included her in impromptu gatherings to talk about departmental business. And the department never recommended her for an award, even though, she says, it had recommended several of her male colleagues for awards. "As a woman," she says, "there's a sense of invisibility."

North Dakota State has hired a consultant to interview former faculty members to figure out why women leave. Administrators don't think the problem is money. Studies show that male and female professors here are paid at the same rates, and that when men and women come up for tenure, they succeed at the same rates, although in general professors earn only 90 percent of what colleagues earn at peer institutions.

But university officials are beginning to realize there must be other explanations for why even nearby

institutions have greater percentages of female faculty members. For example, only five miles away, at Minnesota State University at Moorhead, women account for about 38 percent of the tenured faculty, compared with North Dakota State's 13 percent.

"If we're going to be a player on the national scene," says Mr. Chapman, the university's president, "we have to address this issue."

When asked to comment on allegations that women made in conversations with *The Chronicle*, the university said it had received no formal complaints from any of them.

"I have sat with many of those women in meetings month after month for many years and never heard those things," says Ms. Holbrook, the recently retired director of equity and diversity. "Did I hear generally in those meetings that women were concerned about ways in which they were reviewed? Did I hear they were omitted from certain settings? Yes. But those are hard to raise as complaints because they are about climate, and they are subtle."

That doesn't mean they aren't important, she goes on. "It is the low-level, day-to-day wearing, eroding kind of stuff that takes away people's energy and psychological stamina," she says. But it is difficult for the university to police those problems, she says, particularly when many of the situations happen within departments and among faculty members.

Ms. Holbrook says the chairmen of the political-science and mathematics departments about whom some women complained to *The Chronicle* no longer head those departments.

And the university has made several recent changes to improve the climate for women, she adds. Besides extending the day-care center to year-round operation, it has added more infant spaces, which are hard to find. It has installed a lactation room on the campus, for nursing mothers. It is also hoping to win the National Science Foundation grant this time around, to bolster the university's commitment to helping female faculty members succeed.

The new efforts may be having an effect. Kendra J. Greenlee accepted a job as an assistant professor of biological sciences this fall. She knew beforehand that North Dakota State was low on women. But she passed up two other job offers to come here because people seemed supportive of her and committed to improving the status of women on the campus. Her daughter attends the campus preschool. "There may not be many women here," she says, "but everyone's concerned about women's issues."

Perhaps the most effective means that the university has to hang on to female faculty members is its willingness to hire academic couples. North Dakota State has a policy that says faculty spouses can be hired without a national search. Currently almost 40 percent of the university's 111 female professors are married to male professors on the campus.

Ms. Wolf-Hall and her husband came here together in the mid-1990s. They wanted to stay close to their families: She is from South Dakota, he from Wisconsin. Theoretically she should be happy here. Not only does her spouse work on the same campus, but their two elementary-school age kids attend an outstanding public school. And because the cost of living here is low, the family could afford a home with a large lot where they grow fruits and vegetables.

But the university has not always treated her well. It stripped her of her laboratory during a restructuring, in 2002. This year it passed her over when it named a new director of its Great Plains Institute of Food Safety. For the past year, Ms. Wolf-Hall was serving as the institute's interim director and had made it clear that she was interested in the permanent job.

But administrators "said they wanted someone who could stand up to these male bull-moose full professors,"

she says. One colleague, she recalls, consoled her by telling her that if she didn't get the job, "at least I could spend more time with my family."

The university just hired a male full professor and named him the institute's director. Ms. Wolf-Hall is now associate director. She acknowledges that he is more qualified for the job than she is. But the whole episode didn't make her feel very loyal to the university.

"We're staying here for now," she says, "but there are certainly days when if someone would come to recruit us away, we might consider going."

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