

BUILDING A STUDENT SUPPORT NETWORK

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An effort was initiated in October 1991 to build a support network for women students in science, math, and engineering at Columbia University and Barnard College. This effort began with the founding of the "Women In Science Exchange" (W.I.S.E.) which consisted at first of women undergraduate and graduate students in the physics and astronomy departments. The group has since expanded to include women students from other departments in the physical and biological sciences, engineering, and math.

We exchange ideas, opinions, and practical information. At each meeting, the group discusses a specific topic. By imposing this structure on the meetings, we accomplish something constructive, viewing any given issue from many perspectives so as to learn about ourselves as well as the academic environment. General topics include: "classroom dynamics," "academic pressure on women," and "observing our own behavior." Informational topics include: "majoring in physics or astronomy," "how to apply to grad school," "advisor fair," or "how to pick an advisor."

The exchange works because we rely on each woman to play an active role by relating her own experiences, so that every issue becomes real rather than hypothetical. The issues we discuss offer a revealing look at common problems encountered by women students in astronomy and physics. These issues are presented in an article I wrote entitled, "The Visible and the Isolated: The Story of Women Students of Physics and Astronomy" (APS News; April, 1992).

In addition to our group discussions, we engage in other types of activities. We held a successful women faculty/student pot luck dinner. Also, in honor of women's history month earlier this year, we sponsored a talk by Prof. C. S. Wu (known to many as Madame Wu) in which she discussed what it is like to be a woman and to pursue a career in experimental physics. Prof. Wu discovered experimentally the non-conservation of parity in 1957 and is only the second woman to receive tenure in the history of the Columbia University physics department. Prof. Wu also discussed many political and social issues affecting women in science.

We have established a local electronic W.I.S.E network. We have also established a bulletin board in the entrance to the physics and astronomy building called "Women in Physics and Astronomy." We post articles, fellowship/scholarship listings, surveys, and announcements of our W.I.S.E. meetings. Vandalism is a recurring problem. For instance, we posted an excerpt from Vivian Gornick's book *Women in Science*, in which she quotes from an interview with the late Columbia Prof. I. I. Rabi. In this interview, he stated, "Women may go into science, and they will do well enough, but they will never do great science." We wanted to point this out because there is a program for talented undergraduates called "The Rabi Scholars Program" and there are women in this program. We thought that rather ironic and disturbing. The posted excerpt was ripped down after only a few days.

There have been other incidents as well. Judging from messages appearing on the national WISENET on the subject of vandalism, it appears that vandalism is a

common problem. Nonetheless, we have received a tremendous amount of positive feedback concerning the bulletin board as well. Many people have requested copies of articles and listings which appeared on the board.

It is clear that W.I.S.E. is making a difference. Since our group began, both women and men have had lively discussions of a variety of issues in offices, laboratories, and corridors. We believe the presence of our group is creating a positive environment for women students on campus.

I have compiled a directory entitled "Women's Groups," which contains descriptions of various groups that address the concerns of women in astronomy and related disciplines. It is important to make people aware of activities taking place across the globe and to build a communication network among these groups. The directory complements the AASWomen, WISENET, and WONET electronic bulletin boards.

Finally, thanks must be extended to the astronomy department and, in particular, to Prof. David Helfand for supporting our efforts from the very beginning. A great deal of energy has been expended to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for students with very diverse experiences and backgrounds. W.I.S.E. might not have succeeded had this foundation not existed previously.

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