March 21, 2011

Gains, and Drawbacks, for Female Professors

By KATE ZERNIKE

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — When the Massachusetts Institute of Technology acknowledged 12 years ago that it had discriminated against female professors in "subtle but pervasive" ways, it became a national model for addressing gender inequity.

Now, an evaluation of those efforts shows substantial progress — and unintended consequences. Among other concerns, many female professors say that M.I.T.'s aggressive push to hire more women has created the sense that they are given an unfair advantage. Those who once bemoaned M.I.T.'s lag in recruiting women now worry about what one called "too much effort to recruit women."

Much as a report accompanying M.I.T.'s acknowledgment more than a decade ago offered a rare window on an institution tackling gender discrimination, the new study, being released Monday, shows how thorny the problem is — and not just at M.I.T.

"It's almost as though the baseline has changed, because things are so much better now," said Hazel L. Sive, associate dean of the School of Science, who led one of the committees writing the report. "Because things are so much better now, we can see an entirely new set of issues."

An array of prizes and professional accolades among female professors has provided a powerful rebuttal to critics who suggested after the earlier report that women simply lacked the aptitude for science — most infamously, Lawrence H. Summers, whose remarks set off his downfall as the president of Harvard.

But with the emphasis on eliminating bias, women now say the assumption when they win important prizes or positions is that they did so because of their gender. Professors say that female undergraduates ask them how to answer male classmates who tell them they got into M.I.T. only because of affirmative action.

Because it has now become all but the rule that every committee must include a woman, and there are still relatively few women on the faculty, female professors say they are losing up to half of their research time, as well as the outside consultancies that earn their male colleagues a lot of money.

While women on the tenure track 12 years ago feared that having a child would derail their careers, today's generous policies have made families the norm: the university provides a yearlong pause in the tenure clock, and everyone gets a term-long leave after the arrival of a child. There is day care on campus and subsidies for child care while traveling on business.

Yet now women say they are uneasy with the frequent invitations to appear on campus panels to discuss their work-life balance. In interviews for the study, they expressed frustration that parenthood remained a women's issue, rather than a family one.

As Professor Sive said, "Men are not expected to discuss how much sleep they get or what they give their kids for breakfast."

Administrators say some men use family leave to do outside work, instead of to be their children's primary care giver — creating more professional inequity.

And stereotypes remain: women must navigate a narrow "acceptable personality range," as one female professor said, that is "neither too aggressive nor too soft." Said another woman: "I am not patient and understanding. I'm busy and ambitious."

Despite an effort to educate colleagues about bias in letters of recommendation for tenure, those for men tend to focus on intellect while those for women dwell on temperament.

"To women in my generation, these residual issues can sound small because we see so much progress," said Nancy H. Hopkins, a molecular biologist who instigated the first report. "But they're not small; they still create an unequal playing field for women — not just at universities, and certainly not just at M.I.T. And they're harder to change because they are a reflection of where women stand in society."

The original effort started in 1994, when Professor Hopkins was frustrated that the university had resisted giving her lab space for new research, and that a course she developed had been given to a male professor. She considered herself a scientist, not a feminist, and only tentatively shared her concerns with another female professor.

Finding common complaints, they reached out to other women on the School of Science faculty — and discovered that it was remarkably easy to survey them, because there were only 15 women with tenure, compared with 197 men.

Women undergraduates outnumbered men in some departments, but the percentage of women on the faculty had remained relatively flat for 20 years. The school had never had a woman in any position of leadership.

The women gathered more data — crawling on the floor with tape measures to compare lab space for men and for women. They took their concerns to the dean, Robert J. Birgeneau, who did his

own study, which backed up the women's conclusions that there were wide disparities in salary and resources and a general marginalization of women.

"I have always believed that contemporary gender discrimination within universities is part reality and part perception," the university's president, Charles M. Vest, wrote in the 1999 report. "True, but I now understand that reality is by far the greater part of the balance."

That unusual admission by one of the nation's most prestigious universities echoed far beyond campus. The National Science Foundation and the National Academies began significant efforts to increase opportunities for women in science. Major philanthropies gave $1 million to help M.I.T. spread the word, and other universities replicated the effort. The women who started it all at M.I.T. are still being called to other campuses seeking to evaluate the treatment of women.

While the original study looked at just the School of Science, one of five schools at M.I.T., the institute later did similar evaluations of the School of Engineering, and then the other faculties.

Women at the Schools of Science and Engineering decided to repeat the study of their schools this year after the head of physics, Edmund Bertschinger, suggested a two-day conference on the women of M.I.T. to help mark the institute's 150th anniversary.

In what the new study calls "stunning" progress, the number of female faculty members has nearly doubled in the School of Science since 1999 and in the School of Engineering since its original study was completed in 2002. More women are in critical decision-making positions at M.I.T. — there is a female president, and women who are deans and department heads. Inequities in salaries, resources, lab space and teaching loads have largely been eliminated.

"I thought things might get better, I thought people had good will, but I never dreamed we'd make this much progress in 10 years," said Lorna J. Gibson, who led the Engineering School study.

Some of the problems noted in the report are brought on by progress: the university now struggles to accommodate two-career couples; a decade ago, women with tenure tended to be married only to their careers.

But the primary issue in the report is the perception that correcting bias means lowering standards for women. In fact, administrators say they have increased the number of women by broadening their searches. No one is hired without what Marc A. Kastner, the dean of the School of Science, called "off-scale" recommendations from at least 15 scholars outside M.I.T.

Among women on the science and engineering faculties, there are more than two dozen members of the National Academy of Sciences; four winners of the National Medal of Science; the recipient of the top international award in computer science; and the winners of a host of other fellowships and prizes.

“No one is getting tenure for diversity reasons, because the women themselves feel so strongly that the standards have to be maintained,” Professor Kastner said.

Faculty members said that the perception otherwise would change as more women were hired and the quality of their achievement became obvious.

“The more fundamental issues are societal,” Professor Kastner said, “and M.I.T. can’t solve them on its own.”