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Reality Check

By [Mary Hatcher-Skeers](#)

When I started teaching chemistry at a women's college 10 years ago, a sophomore named Tahnee came to me and said she wasn't very good at math, so was a bit nervous about taking chemistry. She wanted to become a doctor, so she said I had better be a good teacher. As a young professor, I was taken aback, but also impressed with this student's confidence and drive.

Tahnee proceeded to attend every office hour I scheduled. Sometimes she had problems on homework but often, she simply did extra problems at the tables outside my office door. Apparently, she told her friends that this was a good way to learn chemistry, and soon, I had about 10 women sitting outside my door during every office hour. They would help each other with problems or send representatives to my office if they got stuck.

After a while, I asked Tahnee how she got all these young women to spend so much time doing chemistry. She explained that she lectured them about how people didn't think that women could do science and that it was up to them to prove that Scripps women were better at chemistry than their male counterparts. I was stunned. This young woman understood that gender discrimination existed but wasn't about to let that stop her.

At this point, Claremont McKenna College, a member of our joint science department, had far more chemistry majors than Scripps. But now, 10 years later, that situation is reversed. I have come to understand the value of a woman's college in terms of encouraging young women to study science.

I wonder if Tahnee, as much as she was a leader, would have parked outside my office if she attended a co-ed college. In the single-sex environment, women (students, faculty and staff) have high expectations for each other and help each other live up to those expectations.

Seeing the successes of young women at women's colleges makes me proud to work at Scripps. As a chemistry professor and now the mother of three daughters, what more could I ask for?

Actually, a lot. Because when the Tahnees go on to graduate school, the reception isn't always a warm one. Nationally, nearly 50 percent of chemistry undergraduates are women, but it's nowhere near that percentage when it comes to gender equity in Ph.D. programs or in academic careers. And the reason for the falloff continues to be gender discrimination.

We have had a number of women chemistry majors, from each of our participating colleges (Scripps, Pitzer and Claremont McKenna), go on to graduate school and be quite successful, but they often remark that the transition is difficult. A few years ago, one of my Scripps students enrolled in a Ph.D. program in chemistry but had trouble

finding a research lab that would take her. I remember her words when she informed me of her decision to leave with a master's degree: "You never told me that in science, men assume I'm stupid."

The recent *Harvard Business Review* study on brain drain,

["The Athena Factor: Reversing the Brain Drain in Science, Engineering, and Technology,"](#) found that 41 percent of highly qualified scientists, engineers, and technologists on the lower rungs of corporate career ladders are female. But the study found that 52 percent drop out because they are marginalized by hostile macho cultures. This contradicts Susan Pinker's argument in "The Sexual Paradox," that women leave science fields because they were pushed to be scientists and engineers and they ended up in jobs they didn't enjoy. While Pinker's argument may hold true for some we simply cannot ignore that prejudices in science exist and have a negative effect on the women in these careers.

Not buying it? Consider recent [blogger comments](#) on a higher education blog:

- "So the problem is women won't take risks, won't spend enough time at work, choose unconventional and even 'mysterious' career paths, and don't successfully fit into the workplace culture. My gosh, if I said that, I'd be branded a MCP!"
- "If they can't stand the heat, they should get back to the kitchen."
- "I like behaving like a male. I find women interesting to a point. The problem is that we need we need more GOOD-LOOKING females in the science field."

Such comments demonstrate a mind-set that is damaging to women in science. I forwarded the article and the string of blog comments to a female colleague in biology and she responded, "This is so depressing!" Why is it that there are those out there who are still trying to make being a woman in science so depressing?

Sadly, these bloggers point out another problem we thought was solved. Many insist that the discriminators are the old men and things will get better once they retire or die off. But blogging is the sphere of younger men so the comments above likely came from male academics who will be around a long time.

A junior colleague once questioned my work with a women in science committee on campus. "It is not like the 60s," he said. "Those women had it really tough. Today at least we let you women have these jobs, we let you in the door." I informed him that we were not 'let in' but that we were highly qualified teachers and scholars and that our credentials must never be questioned.

A 1999 MIT study on the status of women faculty in science states, "Once and for all we must recognize that the heart and soul of discrimination, the last refuge of the bigot, is to say that those who are discriminated against deserve it because they are less good."

The MIT study is an excellent example of what can be achieved when people come together to solve a difficult problem. Their recommendations included establishing a continuing review of primary data to ensure that inequities do not occur, and ensuring close communication among senior women faculty, department heads, deans, and university leadership to prevent marginalization of women faculty and to integrate senior women faculty knowledge of gender issues at the level where academic power resides. The latter will remain critically important until women faculty routinely occupy positions of academic power.

In 2000, to advance the cause of women scientists, I created a Celebrating Women in Science Speaker Series. Harvey Mudd and Pomona Colleges, the other members of the Claremont Consortium, have endowed lectureships in chemistry but over the years have hosted very few female scientists. The Scripps version was intended to remedy that. Well-known women scientists have discussed their work, but more importantly, their career trajectories and methods they had learned to navigate a career in science.

In 2006, I did something unheard of. I invited a man to be the series speaker. Richard Zare, chair of chemistry at Stanford University, had written an article in *Chemical & Engineering News* entitled, ["Sex Lies and Title IX,"](#) in which he endorsed the use of Title IX to address the lack of equity in science, just as the federal law has been used to promote equity in athletics. Even someone as enlightened as Professor Zare admits that he sometimes succumbs

to a culture that, in his words, “broadcasts signals about the innate superiority of men.”

Women colleagues expressed concern over the need for bringing in a man to discuss issues facing women in science. Sadly, while I agreed with them at some level, I knew we did need him. The Zare lecture was attended by more of the male scientists in Claremont than any of the previous 12 lectures. Zare discussed a number of the issues women have regularly raised, but coming from him, it had more weight.

[A recent study](#)

of the plight of women leaders by Catalyst found that women leaders often offer ideas in a meeting, only to have a male colleague restate the idea and take credit for it. A senior executive quoted in the study advised women to “nip it in the bud,” by thanking the male colleague for rewording your idea, and then asking the rest of the meeting attendees what they think about implementing it. While “nipping it in the bud” is a good idea, it gets really tiring having to fight to be heard.

Being tired is my final point. Studies discuss how women leave science, or become disenchanted, later in their careers. I think the dissatisfaction comes when you’ve gotten tired of fighting to be heard, to be counted, to be taken seriously. When we are young, we think we can overcome anything. It is when we realize that we have not overcome the obstacles but instead simply learned to live with them that we become disenchanted. This is what I want to see changed. I do not want my daughters to find their dream job in a male-dominated career, only to later be too tired and beat up to enjoy it.

I think most male scientists have good intentions, but as Zare pointed out, gender discrimination is embedded in our culture. Gender discrimination can only be eradicated through a collective desire to eradicate it. We cannot continue to dismiss reports on brain drain, such as the recent *Harvard Business Review* study, as women whining. Such studies prove the problem has not been solved. We must remain vigilant. The attitudes and ideals about creating spaces for women as scholars and leaders may be the norm where I work, but we have to be vigilant about spreading these attitudes and ideals throughout academia and beyond.

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The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/views/2008/07/25/hatcher>.

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