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An advertisement for the Toshiba Portégé M700 laptop. On the left, a black laptop is shown with a silver pen resting on its lid. To the right of the laptop, the text "Portégé® M700" is written in a large, bold, red font. Further to the right, the Toshiba logo is displayed in red, with the tagline "Leading Innovation >>" below it. At the bottom right of the advertisement, there is a red rectangular button with the white text "EXPLORE NOW".

March 28, 2007

## A Lab of Their Own

Get them in.

Attract them as students and recruit them as faculty. Do what you can to keep them in the academy. That's generally been the mantra of those who are concerned about the [dearth of women in university science](#).

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute is trying to shift some of that attention to another goal: Move them up. As in, once you've started to succeed at hiring women for junior positions, it's time to set out a plan to get them to become full professors. That's the intent of [Reforming Advancement Processes through University Professions](#) (or RAMP-UP), an initiative announced Tuesday during an RPI summit on women's advancement in academe.

The effort is funded by a \$329,960 grant from the National Science Foundation. Cheryl Geisler, the project's leader and department head of language, literature and communications, said that while RPI — led by a female scientist — has had recent success hiring women at the assistant professor level, there's little tradition of female representation in the senior ranks, although there has been recent progress.

In 2001, Rensselaer had 82 tenure and tenure-track women and 499 male counterparts overall. (The figures include non-science positions, but RPI is heavily oriented toward science and technology departments.) Of those faculty members, 30 women and 217 men were tenured. Five years later, the institution had 106 tenure and tenure-track women and 531 men of the same rank. By that point, 40 female professors had tenure, compared with 238 male professors.

This continued gender disparity has prompted RPI to seek funding to improve its female numbers in high-ranking positions, Geisler said.

"It's an unusual project — a next-step focus that builds on our earlier work to get more women to enter our faculty," she said.

The issue of women not reaching the upper ranks of academe found a home again in 2006. A [study](#) by the American Association of University Professors showed significant gaps in salaries and in the percentages of faculty members in the senior ranks of universities, especially at doctoral institutions. A National Academies committee also issued a [report](#)

last year saying that women are seriously underrepresented on academic science and engineering faculties because of a mix of "unintentional" biases and outdated institutional policies and structures.

Speakers at the RPI colloquium reiterated some of the oft-cited problems for women seeking career advancement in academe: the good-ol'-boy networks, the rigid tenure clocks and a hesitancy to sell oneself by publishing prolifically. Geisler said her research about promotions at RPI showed that female faculty members tended to network less and receive less career advice than their male counterparts, and thus were put at a disadvantage.

“Unless you have advice and mentoring that’s not official, you’re not getting the full picture,” she said. “We found that women weren’t getting information about things as simple as timelines to becoming full professors. They didn’t know how to start the process.”

That’s why the new RPI initiative focuses on mentoring, includes faculty workshops to address major issues surrounding women’s advancement and introduces a pipeline search to recruit senior-level women from industry or national labs. Each school at the university will hire a “coach” to advise faculty and serve as a resource for various promotion and tenure review committees. Senior faculty members from both inside and outside Rensselaer will also help women who are junior faculty members develop a plan for advancement.

“They will see and relate to professional mentors who have reached their professional goals,” said Shirley Ann Jackson, Rensselaer’s president, adding that she wants RPI’s initiative to serve as a national model.

Seven current junior faculty members are being given grants to help advance their research as part of the “career campaigns” component of the initiative. Mariana Figueiro, one of the \$5,000 grant recipients, said she will have mentors both within and outside of her department. An assistant professor of architecture and a program director in the Lighting Research Center, where she has worked for 10 years, Figueiro has just started on the tenure track.

She said because she doesn’t have full financial support from architecture, the grant will help her pay for travel to medical schools to form collaborations that she said should, in turn, help advance her research.

“My biggest concern is that I’m an outlier in the process,” she said. “In terms of the advancement of a junior faculty member [with multiple academic homes], it’s helpful to have extra support — as far as funding and knowing what it takes to make it in the tenure process. How do I balance going out and raising money and trying to attract Ph.D. students?”

Carol Colatrella, a colloquium speaker and professor of literature and cultural studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology, said during Tuesday’s event that the problem of gender inequality among the professoriate is more pronounced at her institution, given its focus on fields that traditionally struggle to attract women to top positions. But Geisler said her research at RPI found that the humanities and social sciences often fare worse than the technical fields in cultivating high-level female professors.

“This is a university-wide initiative — a problem we are all dealing with,” Geisler added. “If senior women are in place, the whole process of advancement [for future female professors] is turned around.”

— [Elia Powers](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/03/28/rpi>.*

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