

November 9, 2009 Letters

Title IX From Other Perspectives

David Hanson's *Government & Policy Insights* questions the use of Title IX, the provision in the 1972 civil rights law that forbids discrimination in education by gender, to increase the number of women in science and engineering ([C&EN, Aug. 24, page 31](#)). The author uses statistics creatively to assert that women are fairly represented in the sciences and that the real crisis is that the participation of men in the sciences is decreasing.

Certainly, women participate in some sciences, particularly social and biological sciences, at a rate equivalent to men. But in other disciplines, specifically the physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering, women's participation has been and continues to be abysmal. Thirty-seven years after the enactment of Title IX, those of us who care about the education and economic security of the women who comprise half the U.S. population continue to wonder why.

The author's characterization of Title IX as a way to guarantee "equal numbers" of women and men in these fields is misleading at best. He uses his article to raise the fear that Title IX will do to science what critics believe it has done to athletics—that is, cut opportunities for men in favor of achieving some sort of quota of women. Such an analysis completely disregards the fact that Title IX is not a quota as well as the fact that the number of athletic participation opportunities for men has actually risen despite the budgetary priorities that have led some schools to cut teams.

Those of us who advocate Title IX as a tool for reforming education in engineering and the physical sciences hope for something more meaningful than simply achieving some numerical goal. We hope that Title IX reviews by federal funding agencies will help identify those promising practices that bring more women into these fields and share those practices across academia. We also hope that the reviews will point out areas where educational institutions that are spending taxpayer dollars could do better in terms of meeting the needs of women interested in these fields, but who are perhaps turned off by the climate.

What Title IX can do, as shown by the National Aeronautics & Space Administration's recent Title IX reviews, is identify the policies, practices, and procedures that inhibit the full participation of women in these fields. And experience has shown that, when the climate of an educational institution is improved to support the full participation of women in an academic field, men and the nation's overall competitive edge benefit as well.

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Hanson's article "Targeting Gender Equity in Science" misconstrues the purview of Title IX. He has assumed that Title IX only applies to student access to institutional programs. Because others made that mistake in the 1970s and 1980s, Congress passed an amendment in 1987 clarifying that the prohibition on sex discrimination includes all the operations of an educational institution, governmental entity, or private employer that receives federal funds. In fact, although Hanson focuses solely on students, most recent initiatives to strengthen Title IX activities have nothing to do with student admissions, curricula, or sports teams. Instead, they are intended to shine a spotlight on persistent problems in recruitment and retention of women faculty.

The faculty gender gap in chemistry departments is hard to deny. The most recent ACS annual survey ([C&EN, Dec. 22, 2008, page 40](#)) noted that among the top 50 chemistry departments, women average only 16% of the faculty. As the 2008 C&EN report noted, progress may be steady, but it is very slow. One of the best ways to speed things up is to focus attention on the problem, which is precisely what Title IX scrutiny is intended to accomplish.

Hanson claims the "real problem" is U.S. men rejecting chemistry. His suggested response to this problem is to keep it difficult for women to enter the profession, which I think is curious logic. Faced with fewer U.S. male chemists, we should put more efforts into increasing the number of chemists, both male and female. We would also do well to ponder why men are abandoning chemistry careers and ask whether men are influenced by some of the same considerations that discourage women from entering the field. Issues of work-life balance loom large for this generation of U.S. professionals, and younger men are not immune to these pressures. By evaluating how we can make chemistry careers more family-friendly, we are likely to make these careers more attractive for both sexes.

National Science Foundation data indicate that although women were 52% of U.S. residents earning chemistry baccalaureate degrees in 2006, they were only 35% of Ph.D. recipients and 20% of postdocs. We hear reports of women graduate students and women postdocs assigned the least promising research projects or told that they cannot succeed as chemists if they have children.

Without data generated via Title IX studies, these are just anecdotes. If these inequities are rare, we may rejoice. If they are significant, let's fix them. Title IX can help us do that.

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