

Women Scientists Working for Recognition

By JEFFREY THOMAS

Ida Henrietta Hyde, who revolutionized neurophysiology by creating the microelectrode, had to contend with strict “no women” policies for postgraduate education at universities, but in 1896 still became the first American woman to receive a Ph.D. from Germany’s Heidelberg University.

Her dissertation adviser initially laughed at her desire to obtain a degree, and she was not allowed to attend lectures or laboratories, according to her memoir, *Before Women Were Human Beings*. But she blazed a path German women soon would follow and helped show American universities the error of not admitting women to their graduate programs.

Since Gerty Cori became the first American woman to win a Nobel Prize in science in 1947, American women have won such prizes and awards with increasing frequency. Women still do not, however, win with the frequency one would expect given their increasing numbers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). But a new project initiated by professionals and supported by the Society for Women’s Health Research in Washington, D.C. seeks to change that by providing help at a critical stage: the award nominating process.

The RAISE Project documents the glass ceiling that looms over women in the STEM fields and offers a searchable database on how to apply or nominate someone for more than 1,000 different awards. RAISE stands for “recognition of the achievements of women in science, engineering, mathematics and medicine.”

The project began when a group of women involved in the sciences and related professions held their monthly networking get-together several years ago just as the year’s recipients of the National Medal of Science were announced. Not a single woman was among them.

“Awards facilitate career advancement in academics and industry, provide personal validation

of career choice, and enhance individual job satisfaction—all critical facets of recognizing the achievements of women,” says Dr. Stephanie Pincus, recalling that evening. Pincus, a former chair of the Department of Dermatology at the University of Buffalo in New York, is directing the RAISE Project.

She says the group focused on a single question: “What are we going to do about this?”

“So I said the way to fix this is to increase the nominations, because if you aren’t nominated, you can’t win,” says Pincus, who is a medical doctor and holds a master’s degree in business. But her initial notion of creating a clearinghouse that would match outstanding women with the available awards quickly proved administratively unworkable.

“So we transitioned to becoming an interactive Web site,” Pincus says. She collaborated on the project with Dr. Florence Haseltine, an obstetrician and gynecologist at the National Institutes of Health. “Our goal with the Web site was to provide information. As we’ve developed the Web site, we’ve tried to provide a lot more instruction, advice and counseling as to how to prepare an award—what factors can be helpful.”

The RAISE Project has documented that gender barriers persist in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Women constitute almost one-third of the teaching and research faculty in these fields at four-year colleges and universities, according to the most recent data from the U.S. National Science Foundation.

Only 17 percent of the awards given out since 1981 have been won by women, and almost one-third of the women who received recognition won an award given only to women.

Of the more than 1,000 awards tracked by the RAISE Project, one-third have had fewer than one percent female recipients.

No woman has won the Flexner Award for extraordinary contributions to the medical education community, for example, or the American Association for Cancer Research Award for Lifetime Achievement in Cancer Research, or the



Above: Gerty Cori and husband, Carl Cori, at their Washington University laboratory in St. Louis, Missouri.

Right: Grace Hopper, a computer programming pioneer.



Fields Medal for outstanding mathematical achievement and potential.

Only 8.3 percent of the Lasker Awards—among the most coveted awards in medical science—have been won by women.

“But I am very confident that things will get better,” Pincus says.

“One of the things we’re really working on is to try and bring transparency within award processes and organizations,” she says. “We’ve shown that the composition of the award committee is very critical to the gender of the recipient.”

She cites research that has begun to probe how culture affects letters of recommendation and nomination.

“It isn’t just something men do to women; there’s a way women have of writing about what they do, writing about their projects, that is not as strong as what men say. It’s considered unfeminine to self-promote,” she says. “Those are some of the things we have to address in both our awards processes and our academic promotions.”

“I’ve just been absolutely amazed how this has struck a chord of responsiveness in organizations. We’re working with the American [Association for] Women in Science to put together more organizational change issues because it’s sort of something everybody knew but nobody had the data. We knew it intuitively, but we didn’t have any way for addressing it. What we’ve provided is a mechanism for people to say, ‘Oh yes—this is a problem and this is what we know we need to do to fix it.’”

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For more information:

RAISE Project

<http://www.raiseproject.org/>

Association for Women in Science

<http://www.awis.org/>