

It's Not All Smooth Sailing

MORE THAN A YEAR AGO, I proposed devoting an issue of this magazine to the subject of women in oceanography. Since then, plenty of people have asked me why such an issue was needed. What did I hope to accomplish? How am I going to keep things positive in light of the grim statistics? What's my message? Who is the audience?

Now, writing this note in late January, I can say that I was a bit prescient. The op-ed pages and blogs are abuzz with commentary about Harvard President Larry Summers' recent remarks questioning whether there is an innate difference in men and women in the sciences and mathematics, which might account for the dearth of women in academia in these fields. (Exactly what President Summers supposedly said depended on which newspaper or blog you read, as he hadn't yet provided a written text of his remarks at a conference on "Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce: Women, Underrepresented Minorities, and Their S. & E. Careers.")

In reality, the concept of doing an issue on women in oceanography came about when I looked at a list of authors for some of the upcoming issues and wondered, where were the women? Not long afterwards, I tossed out a preliminary idea for a special issue on women in oceanography to some women program managers at the National Science Foundation and Office of Naval Research. As it turned out, these two women had been thinking about suggesting just such an issue. If I could better articulate the purpose and contents of the special issue, they would be willing to consider a proposal to sponsor it. My next step was to talk to Peggy Delaney, who had already given a lot of thought to issues relating to women in science and had organized a couple of special undergraduate courses around this theme. I twisted her arm to be the guest editor. After Peggy and I fleshed out our initial thoughts, TOS sent proposals to NSF, ONR, NOAA, NASA, and the USGS, which generously agreed to serve as co-sponsors. I thank all of these agencies for making this issue possible.

Not surprisingly, this special issue on "Women in Oceanography" contains a lot of statistics and observations concerning women's careers and the level at which they seem to be topping out in the academic system. But it also contains many personal stories contributed by our women colleagues. Some of these stories are unique to women. Others should strike a chord with anyone—female or male—who has gone through a rigorous Ph.D. program and then worked in academia. The authors write of hard work, but describe doing oceanography as a labor of love. Many hint at frustrations along the way, and many also attribute successes to the inspiring and encouraging people around them. Some women told me that a lot was left unsaid in their stories. Others wrote to me that they are the only one of their graduate school cohort of women to have remained in academia. All who sent us their stories accomplished the difficult task of condensing a career, and all of its triumphs and struggles, down to one page.

This volume of articles and autobiographical sketches is presented with hope that it will help to identify the barriers to career advancement encountered by women in oceanography and open up further discussion on how these barriers might be broken. Perhaps it will challenge university departments and funding agencies to devise additional innovative programs that might address some of the knotty issues. Women and men alike, especially the aspiring oceanographers who read this volume, can learn from these women's experiences and become inspired by their stories. Although some of the statistics are discouraging, they present a challenge that we all must undertake to get nearer to gender equity in academic oceanography departments. We are up to challenges. After all, we are oceanographers.



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