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Advancing Women, Advancing STEM

Chancellor Harvey Perlman Awards the Third Annual ADVANCE Initiative Award to the Department of Mathematics



Dr. Judy Walker and Chancellor Harvey Perlman. Photo Credit: Gregory R Nathan, UNL University Communications.

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On February 1, Chancellor Harvey Perlman awarded the Third Annual Advance-Nebraska Initiative Award for a STEM department that has creatively furthered the objectives of the ADVANCE initiative to the Department of Mathematics. The Award was accepted on behalf of the department by Judy Walker, the department chair. ADVANCE Administrative CoDirector Evelyn Jacobson said of the award: "Mathematics has always been and continues to be committed to the goals of Advance – by welcoming a woman as chair, one of only two UNL STEM department chairs; having promoted women into the ranks of full professors; having supported women faculty for prestigious national awards; having achieved a percentage of women faculty that exceeds the percentage of women assistant and full professors at CIC peer institutions; and by having succeeded in modeling the success in and the necessity of planning for dual career situations. The Departments of Biochemistry and Biological Systems Engineering were the other two departments nominated, and both showed that they were making strides in increasing the number of women in the department, and were creatively addressing issues of retention, climate, and professional development." At the ceremony, Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Ellen Weissinger and Chancellor Harvey Perlman also announced that they were committed to continuing the award after the ADVANCE grant ends.

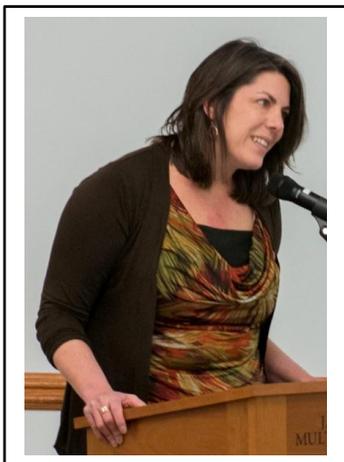


Photo by Gregory R Nathan,
University Photographer

Judy Walker's Acceptance Speech

It's a true honor to accept this award on behalf of the Department of Mathematics. I personally can take very little, if any, credit for the work that went into making our department what it is today.

When Jim Lewis became chair of the department in 1988, he realized that the department was not all he wanted it to be. For one thing, the department was poised to award no PhDs to women in the 1980s. Further, there was only one tenured woman on the faculty. Granted, that woman was Sylvia Wiegand, who later served as President of the Association for Women in Mathematics, but still . . . Jim recognized that it would be far easier to quickly make dramatic changes to the graduate program than it would be to the faculty and that, moreover, positive changes to the graduate program would have a positive impact on the environment in which current and future women faculty would work. He therefore set out to change the profile of our graduate program. He built support among the faculty, including strong support from Roger Wiegand and John Meakin, and this transformation became one that the entire department supported. The changes had a profound effect, but they sound simple: the faculty, mostly men, started actively encouraging strong female undergraduates to consider going on to graduate school; they ensured that applications from qualified women to our graduate program were given careful consideration; and they provided personal mentoring to help women succeed in the program. The department hosted luncheons for women speakers in our colloquium series, and they studied the graduate exam requirements to ensure there were no artificial barriers that might discourage female students (or any students, really) from being successful in our program. Most of all, the department adopted a culture of providing a supportive atmosphere for qualified students in the belief that if one brings qualified people into a supportive environment and expects them to succeed, they will.

The dramatic transformation of our graduate program took significantly less than a decade to achieve. Indeed, not only did the department start awarding a significant proportion of its PhDs to women, but it actually awarded more PhDs to men in the 1990s than it had in the 1980s. So these changes had a positive effect for everyone. Of course, changes to faculty demographics happen much more slowly, but the point is that the supportive atmosphere of our graduate program has also helped the department to recruit and retain women faculty. I was hired in 1996, and I can personally attest that the culture of the graduate program was a big part of why I wanted to join the faculty here. I was also part of a dual career hire. Indeed, the department now has eight women on the faculty and six of us have partners who are also faculty at the university (five in the math department). In addition, Lucho Avramov, Dale Jensen Chair of Mathematics, came to UNL from Purdue with his wife Zoya, who is now a professor in the School of Biological Sciences. I also think it is important to note that the positive inertia regarding women in our department did not stop when Jim stopped being chair: four of the women currently on our faculty were hired by John Meakin, who was chair for the nine years between Jim and myself, and hiring Yu Jin was one of the first things I did when I became chair just over a year ago.

With the support of the entire department, our women graduate students and our women faculty are accomplishing great things. Roughly 40% of our recent PhDs have been women and they're going on to great positions. My colleague Petronela Radu is currently in Ireland on a Fulbright Fellowship; Carina Curto was named a Sloan Fellow in 2011 and is spending the current academic year on a Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellowship. Brigitte Tenhumberg and Petronela Radu were both tenured and promoted effective this academic year, and our faculty have given Christine Kelley a strong recommendation for promotion and tenure.

I'm proud to be part of the math department; I'm honored to lead it; and I'm humbled to accept this award on its behalf. Thank you.

Changing the Culture: John's top ten factors that matter

(with apologies to Dave Letterman and a lot of other people)

Facilitating the kinds of cultural change, institution-wide, that will enable the work initiated by the ADVANCE grant to continue beyond the life of the grant requires an examination of many factors that impact how the institution goes about the business of recruiting and retaining a strong, diverse faculty. Changes in departmental and institutional climate can certainly be made and have been made in several departments across campus - and there is no doubt that *this* kind of climate change is a result of human intervention. Below is one faculty member's personal list of some of the important factors involved in changing or strengthening the culture to enhance the goal of diversifying the faculty. This is not an ordered list, it is not intended as a complete list, it is not endorsed by any committee or informed by any rigorous research, it is simply based on observations of successful policies and practices that others have implemented. The list is intended to stimulate discussion.

- **Leadership matters**, at the campus, college and departmental levels - committed leadership sets the agenda and encourages the kinds of changes needed to implement the agenda.
- **Institutional support matters** - e.g. financial and administrative resources to support a dual career initiative, just one of many factors of importance to the goal of diversifying the faculty.
- **Championship matters** - committed faculty willing to devote energy to the issue, and willing to form a partnership with administration to have an impact.
- **Transparency matters** - having clearly defined and understood policies and procedures for things like faculty searches, periodic reviews, and equitable distribution of resources and assignments of faculty workload.
- **Climate matters** – promoting a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages strong and diverse applications and provides support to qualified people to be successful. Most of us would agree that we want to hire the strongest possible people for positions that become available: a supportive and inclusive climate encourages applications from a strong, diverse applicant pool, enhances success for everyone, and encourages qualified people to build their careers here.
- **Articulation matters** – clearly articulating benefits and imperatives and best practices in promoting the agenda, understanding and articulating the national imperative for this agenda.
- **Recognition matters** - recognizing, rewarding and celebrating success, recognizing contributions to all aspects of the department's mission.
- **Faculty buy-in matters** - requires all of the above and is essential if the goals are to be achieved.
- **Research and scholarship matters** - there is a lot of research and literature about issues involved in diversifying the faculty - such as understanding and minimizing the effect of implicit (and explicit) bias, and many other factors involved in the process of recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty.
- **A broad perspective matters** - extending the focus beyond faculty recruitment and retention to include diversifying the student body at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.



Photos by Gregory R Nathan, University Photographer



UNL Department of Mathematics faculty, staff and students with Chancellor Perlman

Photo Credit: Gregory R Nathan, UNL University Communications.



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