

Family-Friendly Research and Workplace Initiative Announced

PAGE 340

A new U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) initiative aims to increase the participation of women and girls in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) over the next 10 years by providing more flexible research policies, promoting flexible workplace options, and supporting STEM careers for women, Obama administration officials announced on 26 September. Currently, women earn about 41% of STEM doctoral degrees awarded by U.S. educational institutions but make up only about 28% of tenure-track faculty in U.S. colleges and universities, the officials said.

“Unfortunately, too many young women drop out of promising careers in science, engineering, and math because of conflicts between their desire to start families and the need to rapidly ramp up their careers,” said John Holdren, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). “The way to help women stay in the STEM jobs pipeline is to create and support more flexible workplace policies that allow a women’s career—or a man’s, for that matter, but as we know, it’s more common for women to give up STEM careers for family reasons—to thrive even as time is allowed for important family responsibilities.”

Holdren said that with about 50% of the nation’s economic growth over the past several decades attributed to advances in science and engineering, the country “cannot continue to neglect the half of the national talent pool that women represent.” He added that flexible workplace policies also could be beneficial for businesses by helping to attract and retain the best workers and by helping businesses increase their productivity.

The new initiative includes some NSF-wide family-friendly policies to promote women’s advancement and retention in STEM careers, including allowing for the deferment of NSF grants for up to 1 year for parents to care for newborn or newly adopted children; allowing NSF grant suspension for parental leave; and leveraging and expanding partnerships with academic institutions to better support women in STEM careers.

NSF director Subra Suresh said the announcement could have an impact on \$6 billion in NSF research grants on an annual basis and on more than 2000 institutions around the country.

“As women weigh career aspirations against conflicting life events, such as the birth or adoption of a child and providing elder care, family-friendly policies help prevent them from being forced to make difficult decisions,” he said. “They should not

have to choose between their baby and the lab bench.”

During an afternoon ceremony in the White House, First Lady Michelle Obama added, “If we are going to out-innovate and out-educate the rest of the world, then we have got to open doors for everyone. We can’t leave anyone out. We need all hands on deck, and that means clearing the hurdles for women and girls as they navigate careers in science, technology, engineering, and math.”

Officials said the administration also is working to convince academic institutions, businesses, and professional associations to enact their own family-friendly policies. In conjunction with the announcement of the NSF initiative, officials also announced several other programs: OSTP and the White House Council on Women and Girls are launching a Women in STEM Speakers Bureau for girls in grades 6–12 to interact with women scientist role models; the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity plans to expand its STEM Equity Pipeline program to provide professional development training for high school and community college faculty and staff in STEM fields; and the Association for Women in Science will launch a new program to bring together government, industry, and academic representatives to improve STEM workplaces for gender equality and retention, reentry, and retraining for women.

—RANDY SHOWSTACK, Staff Writer