

The Faculty

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i38/38a01001.htm>

From the issue dated May 26, 2006

The Chemistry Between Women & Science

3 female chemists talk about paths to success for women in their field

By ROBIN WILSON

Chemistry is one of the most male-dominated disciplines in academe. In 2003, the most recent year for which such figures are available, about 12 percent of all tenured and tenure-track chemistry professors at the country's top research universities were female. That was the case even though at least 30 percent of the doctoral degrees earned in chemistry go to women.

The discrepancy is similar in other scientific fields, including physics, biology, and computer science. In the last few years, several scholars have been investigating reasons for the gap. And the federal government has recently stepped in, giving grants to encourage universities to improve the climate for women and reviewing science programs for gender bias.

Among those leading the charge to attract more women to science are three female chemists:

- [Donna J. Nelson](#) is a no-nonsense associate professor of chemistry at the University of Oklahoma, who collected the first national data showing that more women are earning doctorates in the sciences than are being hired as professors. The data have been used by groups ranging from the National Organization for Women to the federal government's Government Accountability Office to press universities to hire more female scientists. But Ms. Nelson says her own department at Oklahoma has been uninterested in her findings. (Her department chairman declined to comment.)
- [Debra R. Rolison](#), an analytical chemist with the U.S. Defense Department's Naval Research Laboratory, is an outspoken critic of academic science. She calls the culture "sick" and urges women to "out the toxic departments and research groups" that are uncomfortable places for women to work. "Isn't a millennium of affirmative action for white men sufficient?" she asks in a lecture that she has dubbed her "uppity woman" talk. Ms. Rolison was among the first people to call on the federal government to use Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 to investigate the scarcity of women in academic science.
- [Geraldine L. Richmond](#), a professor of physical chemistry and materials science at the University of Oregon, has created a national support group where female scientists share war stories and learn to negotiate for resources and a better working environment. She has become a touchstone for many women, and says she runs her career in a way that she hopes will show young female scientists that they can be mothers and professors.

The Chronicle spoke to each of the scholars about why so few women work in academic science, what universities should do to turn that around, and how they made their own careers in chemistry.

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Volume 52, Issue 38, Page A10

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