

Lamont Women Scientists' Forum

September 7, 2005

Speaker: Mike Purdy, Director of Lamont

Topic: Dominant Factors in Appointment and Promotion Decisions in US Academia

Summary

Mike Purdy began the discussion by describing the “buzz words” that are often heard in appointment and promotions meetings: “leadership, impact, and homerun.” He focused his remarks on leadership because of all the criteria, it can be the most difficult to define. Purdy described two types of leadership: leadership by intellect and leadership by activity.

Intellectual leadership can dispel the stereotypical notion of a leader as a “white knight charging across the field.” Purdy defined this type of leadership as that which alters the direction of an entire field of research. It is often measured in terms of citations, but does not have to be achieved through an abundance of publications.ⁱ This type of leader is often collaborative but can work alone and does not necessarily have to raise an exceptional amount of grant funding. The second type of leader leads through activity. This kind of leader will often be well-funded and demonstrate a variety of skills, including persuasion, management, and influence. An activity leader typically runs large, successful research programs.

So how does an institution cultivate leaders? Purdy responded to this question by explaining his approach to promotion and appointment meetings. He said he always reiterates that “the success of the institution depends on your success” and that the institution wants to help develop opportunities for growing research programs. He asks research scientists about the barriers or limiting factors that they experience, so that he can try to help remove obstacles. If all that is needed to overcome the obstacle is short-term funding (e.g., salary support or equipment to test a novel research idea), he tries to make use of the Observatory’s discretionary funds whenever possible. Purdy emphasized the importance of institutional impact as a criterion for discretionary spending. He described the structure of divisions’ discretionary budgets, which include money for capital costs such as furniture and overhead, as well as “green” money that divisions can spend as they see fit.ⁱⁱ

Do people really know where and how to ask for discretionary funds? Robin Bell cited the social science research on negotiation and gender that indicates women are far less likely than men to ask for discretionary items.ⁱⁱⁱ As one woman mentioned, “If you’re always conscientious of the needs of those around you, you probably won’t be the leader in a race.”

Are there skills that women at Lamont are lacking? Purdy asserted that the women scientists at Lamont don’t lack any particular skills; what is lacking is a critical mass of women. This issue was later revisited in a discussion about the importance of role models. As one participant said, “young women need to see senior women scientists

doing the balancing act; they need to see examples of women who run successful research programs *and* do the laundry.” Robin Bell noted that ADVANCE is currently studying the factors that characterize women leaders.

Purdy then asked about the elements of the institutional culture that make it difficult for women to succeed. Many of the women agreed that a lack of mentoring was a critical barrier. This factor seems to disproportionately affect women because they are less likely to really “sell” their work on their own. Some of the participants described situations where they had become isolated from their mentors after declining their mentor’s romantic advances. This type of experience is not an example of overt harassment, but it can significantly alter a career trajectory. On the other hand, men might be inadvertently deterred from mentoring women, especially young and attractive women, because of the risk that others might misinterpret the relationship. One participant concluded that women will eventually become isolated from certain fields if they only work in those environments where they feel comfortable.

Why isn’t there more mentoring at Lamont? The consensus seemed to be that there are few incentives for leaders to mentor. This could be because at elite institutions, “everyone is supposed to be a leader.” In the performance reviews of leaders, mentoring is rarely a criterion for success. While the Lamont Mentoring Award has increased the visibility of those who mentor students, there seems to be little recognition of the need to mentor junior and mid-career research scientists.^{iv} The recommendation was made to expand the scope of the Lamont Mentoring Award to include those who mentor junior research scientists. A second recommendation was made was to incorporate mentoring into the evaluation of associate directors. Channels for anonymous supervisor feedback could also be cultivated – this is currently being done at IRI.

Everyone acknowledged the challenges to implementing cultural change at Lamont. These challenges are due in part to the diversity of procedures across the campus with three distinct research units (Lamont, IRI, and CIESIN). All three have a unique culture and distinct criteria for success. Mike Purdy noted that the upcoming sexual harassment study will be blind to these boundaries and encompass the entire campus.

ⁱ Purdy provided an example of a tenure ad-hoc committee he sat on where the candidate had only published two first-author papers. The candidate ultimately received tenure because those two papers changed the direction of the field.

ⁱⁱ One student asked about the steps necessary to secure discretionary funding for travel to conferences. When Purdy recommended she seek funding from her division, she said she recently tried to secure travel funding, but her division kept referring her to DEES (and vice versa).

ⁱⁱⁱ See, e.g., Babcock, L. and S. Laschever, *Women Don’t Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide* (Princeton University Press: 2003) and ADVANCE Negotiation Workshop Summary, available online at: http://www.earthinstitute.columbia.edu/advance/events_past.html.

^{iv} Concerns were also raised about the lack of recognition that graduate students receive. One woman said that she knows several students who graduated without ever having their research positively acknowledged by their advisor.