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Women in the Academy:
Reflections on Best Practices for Survival and Success

Washington University, St. Louis
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As we think about best practices for promoting the lives and careers of women in the academy, we should note that a revolution is underway in American society that shows no sign of reversing itself in the long term. For the first time in history, women are half of all U.S. workers. This is a social transformation that affects every aspect of our lives.

And it is certainly affecting the landscape of the academy. Women are the majority. We earn 60 percent of the college degrees awarded each year and half of the PhDs and professional degrees. In the past 20 years, the proportion of female college and university presidents has more than doubled. In 1986, less than one in 10 presidents was a woman. In recent years, according to surveys from the American Council on Education, that number has grown to one in four, and 38 percent of chief academic officers are women, although there are still painfully few women of color as presidents or provosts.¹ After college graduation, women keep working. Among college-educated women, 81 percent were in the labor force in 2008, a factor that drops only 3 percentage points when women become mothers. But, as we are well aware, being in the majority isn't yet enough.²

In a study of college-educated men and women, the American Association of University Women found that a woman who goes to the same kind of school, gets the same grades, has the same major, takes the same kind of job with similar workplace flexibility benefits, and has the same personal characteristic---marital status, race, and number of children---earns 5 percent less than her male colleague the first year out of school. And even if she keeps pace, she'll earn 12 percent less ten years later.³ This of course has to change, and to make that happen, we must

¹ Jacqueline E. King, "On the Pathway to the Presidency: Characteristics of Higher Education's Senior Leadership," The American Council on Education, cited by Audrey Williams June in "Pipeline to Presidencies Carries Lots of Women, Few Members of Minority Groups," *Inside Higher Education* (15 Feb 2008).

² Maria Shriver, "The Shriver Report: A Study by Maria Shriver and the Center for American Progress," 2009. available online at <http://awomansnation.com/awn.php> accessed 31 January 2010

³ Judy Goldberg Dey and Catherine Hill, *Behind the Pay Gap* (Washington, DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 2007) 3, cited by *The Shriver Report* and available online at <http://www.aauw.org/research/upload/behindPayGap.pdf> accessed 1 Feb 2010

recognize that we are in a period of insecurity, with many “givens” of the past changing, for men and women alike, and for our institutions.

Maria Shriver, who recently headed a wide-ranging study of contemporary women, compared this shift in large numbers of women into the workforce to the opening of the West, the industrial revolution, the campaign for civil rights, and the advent of the Internet age. As she said, it’s cracking open “many assumptions and underpinnings of our society,” and “making men and women alike struggle to get their footing.”⁴

It is this “struggle to get footing” that we are here to talk about and reflect upon today. I think that Shriver is right that this “revolution,” coming as it does at a time of both global upheaval and major shifts in the diversity of our population centers in this country, is making everyone think more deliberately and carefully about their “place” both at home and at work. In the academy, we are thinking about diversity and inclusion in our institutions and in our disciplines, hoping to build what legal scholar Susan Sturm calls a better “architecture of inclusion” in which everyone feels like full “institutional citizens” – like “insiders.”⁵

And we know that this citizenship does not come easily. We know that we often, for example, start with a critical mass of women receiving degrees in many disciplines and then find that critical mass eroding at each step along the career ladder. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece, they referred to data on retention of women in the sciences after the postdoctoral period: “According to a report published last year by the National Academies, women made up 18 percent of the applicants for tenure-track positions in chemistry at Research I institutions between 1999 and 2003, although women earned 32 percent of the Ph.D.'s in chemistry. In biology, women made up 24 percent of the applicants for tenure-track positions, although they earned 45 percent of the Ph.D.'s.”⁶ Now there are many reasons for this pattern of erosion of critical mass, but I believe that a key facet has to do with failures to make women (and other historically under-represented groups) feel comfortable on the “inside” without checking their identities and commitments (perhaps to family, to community, to collaboration, to interdisciplinarity) at the door.

⁴ Maria Shriver, 2009.

⁵ Susan Sturm, “The Architecture of Inclusion: Interdisciplinary Insights on Pursuing Institutional Citizenship,” 29 *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 247 (2006) 248-334.

⁶ Jill Laster, “Time Crunch for Female Scientists: They Do More Housework than Men,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 Jan 2010, online at http://chronicle.com/article/Female-Scientists-Do-More/63641/?sid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en accessed 1 February 2010

As your Advisory Committee on Women Faculty⁷ has noted, “climate is an issue” and a hospitable climate for women requires more than mere numbers. We have to create and promote a culture of collaboration, of the give and take of social support, of flexibility of models and respect for individual and group differences, and, perhaps most daringly, of risk-taking in which everyone is freer to experiment and to change course.

Many leaders are speaking of the need to break down the silos of the academy---whether in departments, disciplines, or between “town” and “gown”---to encourage more collaborative team work at all levels. This comes at a time when women and men alike in all walks of life are reporting that they feel more and more stressed and more and more alone. In the academy, we can reduce this daily experience of isolation, and improve our work at the same time, by pooling knowledge. An added benefit of a collaborative workplace is that it often produces a great deal of social support – both instrumental and emotional---and a sense of shared fate, more like a family (admittedly with all the tugs and pulls that represents) than a chilly workplace.

Benefits like these have been observed in several institutions working with an ADVANCE grant from the National Science Foundation to promote women in science and engineering. For example, when Diana Billimoria and Greer Jordan observed a science department at Case Western Reserve University⁸ in which the leadership encouraged team teaching, numerous social/intellectual departmental events, and quite a bit of shared and transparent decision making, they found not only good science, but also a strong record of recruitment, retention, and promotion of women.

One female student who was visiting the department at Case Western told Billimoria and Jordan: "I kind of got the feeling that people here at least spoke to each other as opposed to being locked up in their labs all day and not getting along or having time to socialize."⁹ Another woman, a post doc, said, "This environment is so much more like family than it is like work-mates who you don't talk to or care about or see much outside of the workspace."¹⁰

⁷ Notes from the meeting of the Advisory Committee on Women Faculty, 21 January 2009, Danforth University Center.

⁸ Diana Billimoria and C. Greer Jordan, "A Good Place to Do Science: An exploratory Case Study of an Academic Science Department," presented by Diana Billimoria at the 2005 NSF-ADVANCE Meeting in Washington, D.C., online at <http://www.case.edu/admin/aces/AGoodPlaceToDoScience.pdf>.

⁹ Billimoria and Jordan (2005) 9.

¹⁰ Ibid. 10.

In this particular department, the rigid lines between work and play, career and family, campus and community, that can hold women back largely evaporated. In the fall, faculty members even got together to clean the leaves out of each others' gutters— a tradition that illustrates both instrumental and social support at its best!

As this example clearly suggests, building the architecture of inclusion involves institutional work that is both about changing the academy from within and also about how we draw the borders or boundaries between the academy and the world. And in this regard, there are encouraging signs, on campus and off, coming from the growing movement within colleges and universities to become more expansive, more collaborative, more open to community engagement, and therefore more flexible about borders, status, and arrangements that have been more or less in place---such as the divisions between town and gown or between departmental silos---since these institutions were established.

While I've been here in St. Louis, I've been attending a conference sponsored by Washington University, the Brookings Institution and the State University of New York on universities, medical centers, and the well-being of older industrial cities. This conference is based on Brookings research that clearly shows anchor institutions to be playing an increasingly important role in the overall well-being of their metropolitan regions. And I would argue that as we loosen the boundaries between our campuses and our communities, at home and abroad, and become more cognizant of our interdependence and our responsibilities, we will simultaneously change our institutions in ways that may actually work better for our increasingly diverse faculties as they come "inside." Changing our world and changing ourselves may go hand in hand.

At Syracuse, for example, as we increasingly build large-scale collaborative projects in arts, technology and design, inclusive urban education, neighborhood entrepreneurship, and environmental sustainability, to change the face of our older-industrial city, we also build very diverse communities of experts – some faculty, some citizens, some scientists, some artists, some from industry, some from NGOs – and we learn to expand our prototypes of "scholars" and of "scholarship." In fact, we recently modified our tenure and promotion documents, just a bit, to embrace a more nuanced and diverse definition of scholarly excellence and of scholarly products and peers for review. In other words, as we look to working "outside" our borders, we start looking somewhat different "inside" too – and I believe that this will redound to the benefit of our architecture of inclusion, of the way in which we can support and celebrate diversity in who we are and what we

do and value. Not, mind you, throwing out the baby with the bath water, as some might fear, but just welcoming different babies into the tub.

So as we think about best practices for women in the academy, the key from my perspective is to make life, in and across and outside of the academy, more flexible. This may take many forms: more collaboration and social support within departments; more interdisciplinary work across departments so that women begin to experience a critical mass of like-minded partners and mentors, even when their own department may have few; or more expansive connections to communities of experts, in industry, neighborhoods, non-profits, government, outside the academy itself, providing new models of excellence and new career trajectories. There are many faces of flexibility, but in all of them, the opening up of ways of working and living can not only transform the individual but the academy too.

Insiders and Whistle-blowers

And speaking of transformation, we need to constantly think about how to introduce flexibility and openness as we move in greater numbers inside the academy. A few years ago, Anita Hill, professor of law, social policy and women's studies at Brandeis University, made this point in a remarkable op-ed in *The New York Times* entitled "Insider Women With Outsider Values."¹¹ As you will recall, Professor Hill was courageous enough to speak publicly about sexual harassment and the abuse of power in the workplace during the 1991 confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

The subjects of her op ed were two other noteworthy women – Coleen Rowley and Sherron Watkins – who challenged venerable, male-dominated institutions – the F.B.I and Enron – and shed light on the need for reform. Hill noted that these two women “rose through the ranks of male-dominated institutions to become insiders. Yet the not-too-distant history of male exclusivity in their institutions meant both were outsiders as well.”

Hill observed that, as leaders, these women had access to information and authority over others, as well as a heightened awareness of the resistance within their own institutions to much-needed change. It's likely that this knowledge deepened their resolve to speak out – in their cases, "to blow the whistle." Hill articulated a critical contrast between *insider status* – positions of authority and leadership within previously male-dominated institutions – and *outsider values*.

¹¹ Anita F. Hill, "Insider Women With Outsider Values, *The New York Times*, June 6, 2002.

She also argued that it was no coincidence that women like Rowley and Watkins spoke out, for this balance of insider position and outsider values can be a potent impetus for institutional activism. Women in leadership positions can serve the larger good in part because they *have* outsider perspectives and values and don't necessarily "buy" the institution as given. If women can manage to survive and succeed as insiders – and also keep pushing with the perspectives of outsiders – they can make the institution better for all concerned. It is a balancing act, and a difficult one at that. As women, we need to keep our voices, need to keep the sensibilities and awareness we have brought as "outsiders" and integrate them with any power and access we have acquired as "insiders." Of course, in cases like Rowley and Watkins, as it was for Anita Hill, speaking out meant leaving the institutions as a consequence of their activism. Hopefully, we can soon get to a point where speaking out and working for institutional change isn't only an automatic exit strategy.

Of course, pushing for justice, advocating for change – even bringing up the need for change – has never been a task for the timid. This prompted Shirley Tilghman to call efforts to address the under-representation of women in science and engineering "a form of risk-taking behavior that makes bungee jumping and going over Niagara Falls in a barrel seem like child's play."¹² However, there are many brave women in the academy, and even if we don't always feel we have the power or voice we would like, we do have in our consciousness the outsider values and memories that can affect how we behave as colleagues and leaders and strengthen our resolve to advocate for others.

Leave No Group Behind As We Move Inside

It is critical not to forget where we came from. Each of us has memories that can help shape our behavior in highly constructive ways. I got two powerful lessons early in my career as I moved from my confident undergraduate days at Sarah Lawrence to what was then a male-dominated world--- graduate school at Stanford in mathematical-cognitive psychology.

¹² Shirley Tilghman, "Changing the Demographics: Recruiting, Retaining, and Advancing Women Scientists in Academia," remarks at the launch of the ADVANCE Lecture Series at the Earth Institute, Columbia University, March 24, 2005. Online at <http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S11/21/06G40/index.xml> Accessed 8 Feb 2010

On my first day there, I found myself riding the elevator with one of the most powerful cognitive psychologists in the department. He was also quite tall, and I, obviously, was small. He looked down at me and bellowed, "So who are you, and where are you from?" I said my name and that I was a new graduate student recently graduated from Sarah Lawrence. He reared up and said, "We don't take girls from Sarah Lawrence." I said, "Well, you did," and then, thankfully, I arrived at my floor.

In an instant, I had learned that even when you are, in a technical sense, an insider, you can still embody difference ---as I am constantly made aware when tall guys (and women for that matter) take public note of my height. Stereotype threat is a powerful force. Moments when your "outsider" marking becomes clear---- no matter how successful you are---can be either empowering or a problem, and I think we all need to take it as the former!¹³

The second lesson I learned quickly was that we all have a penchant for lionizing exceptional individuals while hanging onto negative views of the groups from which they come. In spite of the fact that I did very well in graduate school and received tenure after three years at my first job at Princeton, I doubt that my senior colleague at Stanford ever revised his views of "girls from Sarah Lawrence." My point is not that I am exceptional---quite the contrary--- but rather that we all glamorize the individual who rises above the expectation for her group but tend to overlook the situation of the group and what stacked the odds against them in the first place. We rarely revise our implicit schemas about groups based upon how individuals within them actually fare, and even more critically, we don't worry about the talent lost by leaving others behind.

As we expand the possibilities for higher education, we must bring along more than the one or two exceptional women or men. We must reduce the odds against the entire group by changing the expectations that routinely work in many ways against them. It has to become the norm, not the exception, to see women and members of other under-represented groups in the circles of influence.

¹³ S.J. Spencer, C.M. Steele, & D.M. Quinn, "Stereotype threat and women's math performance," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 35 (1999): 4 -28.

The Psychology from the Inside

This is where I believe that psychology becomes very relevant to understanding that, even on the inside, women carry an involuntary "marking" as a member of a group, a marking that simply isn't part of the psychology of male "insiders," even as they insist that *their* gender or other identities are "irrelevant."

As social psychologist Claude Steele suggests, women are vulnerable to gender stereotypes even when no one around us "intentionally" wishes to invoke them and even when we ostensibly have succeeded in breaking through barriers into previously male domains.¹⁴ And it is useful to be aware that most – if not all – of the scrutiny we will feel as a function of gender comes in very mundane, subtle, tacit form. The cumulative effect is hard to even measure ourselves, even as we know it is there.

Many of us, for example, have experienced or witnessed the subtle invocation of gender when we argue strongly for a position and suddenly someone says: "Well, let's talk about this calmly or dispassionately." And this experience carries a certain ambiguity: You know they could have said the same thing to a confident, forceful male colleague, but you doubt they would.

Stereotypes about women, described by Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden as "a thousand paper cuts,"¹⁵ can result in discrimination even if the stereotypes are positive. For example, the stereotype of women as compassionate and caring, even passionate, is in many respects a very positive recipe for behavior in organizations, especially in a society long on individualism and short on communal responsibility. Yet, we all know that it can often be invoked to undermine the credibility and leadership strength of individual women in contexts when others, men or women, may feel somewhat threatened by the power of a passionate voice. And even when such "gender schemas," as Virginia Valian among others calls them, are unspoken or unintentional, they can add a perceived level of scrutiny that leads to discomfort – even if it isn't consciously acknowledged – and undermines trust.¹⁶ And it is precisely that trust we must develop if we are to act as insiders and change institutional culture.

Building Trust as Insiders with Outsider Values

¹⁴ Claude M. Steele, lecture at: *Future of Minority Studies*, Cornell University, July 30, 2005.

¹⁵ Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden "Do Babies Matter?: The Effect of Family Formation on the Lifelong Careers of Academic Men and Women," *Academe* 88 (6) (2002), 21-7.

¹⁶ Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 2-3.

So, how can we build trust and momentum for change? I think it takes deliberate work and acknowledging some tacit dynamics of group life. There are a number of ways to make those dynamics explicit by taking deliberate stock of things and sharing ideas for improvement:

Peer group consensus building is very helpful – especially in validating, and thus deflating somewhat, the impact of those thousands of small things that happen every day to put women and other outsiders on guard about their status and security inside. The academy, in my view, tends to over-rate the value of hierarchical mentoring, senior to junior, when peers with shared backgrounds, concerns, and goals can also serve as very effective lateral mentors. Peer group consensus building can reduce isolation, validate shared insights, and forge new practices in scholarship and teaching.

For women, of course, this consensus sharing and building has always been a hallmark of our practices – including, the earliest suffragette conventions, the consciousness raising groups of the women’s movement, and the networks of scholars in women’s studies. What is so important about these peer networks is that they not only empower the participants and bolster their ability to persevere, but they set new scholarly and intellectual directions for their work.

Inter-group conversations can also be very helpful if they can be structured not to point fingers but to reveal the unintentional ways in which people can be made to feel vulnerable just by being who they are, if they're members of minority groups or groups with histories of exclusion. This is especially true if the “outsiders” can lessen their guardedness and the “insiders” can listen without defensiveness.

One way to make this easier is to point out that all of us, men and women alike, are outsiders in some roles and some contexts in our lives. Inter-group conversations are at the heart of the interventions that have been undertaken by many universities in science and engineering departments where women are under-represented, as in the focus groups that form the core of many ADVANCE grants.

No bad actors, but lots of communal responsibility. Sometimes there are bad actors, and universities must have mechanisms and structures in place to deal with sexual harassment and blatant discrimination. But even when there are no bad actors, an important consequence of inter-group conversations is the

acknowledgement of the ways in which gender (or other group-based marking) lurks in the background. At the same time, we need a stronger sense of communal responsibility for counteracting (rather than denying) the automatic effects of gender, even when we have benign intentions.

It is important for individual campuses to support and keep track of the progress of women, and the various academic disciplines and their societies should begin to keep statistics on progress in the professions. Such deliberate record keeping has been slow to take hold, but is beginning to happen. In philosophy, a field with a dearth of black women, the American Philosophical Association has just begun tracking the number of its 10,000 members in North America who are women or scholars of color. We have to start with the numbers, and then turn to the culture behind them.

Balancing Survival and Voice on the Inside

Until some substantial critical mass of women is achieved in our institutions and fields, our search for success must by necessity balance our strategies for survival and consciousness-raising with equally assertive efforts to be agents of transformation. In this, some residue of “outsider” consciousness will remain even with cumulative experience on the inside. So we might as well use it to make the culture of our institutions more amenable to and attractive for women to enter.

Beware of received wisdom. In this regard, I think it is important that we be somewhat wary of traditional received wisdom – such as colleagues who say: “Don’t collaborate, don’t do interdisciplinary work until tenure, don’t be risk-taking, don’t show weakness by changing your mind on a decision” – they’re describing someone we’ll never fully look like or perhaps even want to be like. I always tell new faculty in our orientation sessions that, while it is certainly good to meet the expectations for tenure within their department, on the day they wake up with tenure, they had better be waking up in a place they want to work. Even as we try to fit in and succeed, we cannot lose sight of what is important to us and what motivates us to keep at it. We must preserve those things – whether they are a collaborative or interdisciplinary mode of working, public scholarship, risk-taking leadership styles or any of a host of other “non-traditional” approaches.

Because we are among the insiders in the room, we have the opportunity to bring to bear our sensibilities and our voices as women. We also have the opportunity – and an obligation that is both moral and practical – to help forge the structural and practical supports that can assure our own survival and success, as

well as that of other women. In the process, we can transform the environments and the institutions we inhabit in ways that are better for everyone.

Transformational Leadership: The New Normal” in Institutional Culture

We are living in an age where there is often a “new normal” in terms of numbers, although we must band together to also build a “new normal” in institutional culture and practices. I would suggest that we can do so by examining the kinds of leadership styles we promote, the kinds of daily interactions in our departments and units that we promote, as well as the institutional practices and reward structures that provide incentives for and strong messages about inclusion. If we take such a broad-based approach, then many people across the academy, men and women, faculty, staff, and administrators, and students can all contribute to effect change – even if some of us have to keep raising our voices a little bit louder by virtue of our positions of authority.

In considering how we build this “new normal,” and who responds to the call for action, I obviously put a great deal of weight on the voices of women in leadership positions, and the male allies that they can recruit to the cause. As institutional structures change to be more expansive and more inclusive, on campus and in the community and back and forth between the two, we can create more flexible, collegial, collaborative working environments.

If we can draw less rigid lines between our roles as professionals and our roles as people, we may well also bring other unanticipated benefits. For example, some of the policies that we have all supported to enable women and men to mix careers and families have faltered in large part because they are seen as privileges to be taken at one’s own professional peril, rather than as integral parts of the culture of the institution, and thus as entitlements that benefit all.

As Mason and Goulden suggest, the well-documented complex of biases known as “the maternal wall” impedes the career advancement of women and the minority of men who bear major child-care responsibilities. They and others have suggested a host of ways to address work-life issues, including leave policies, active service with modified duties, stopping the tenure clock, part-time tracks with full benefits, and arrangements to accommodate two-career couples.¹⁷ These and other arrangements are being tried in any number of colleges and universities around the nation, and they have the potential not only to make space for

¹⁷ Mason and Goulden (2002).

individual women but also to create that "critical mass" of women necessary to change the culture of higher education. But these policies will not work to their full effect unless they become second nature in the culture of our departments and units, and are seen as expanding the possibilities for excellence for everyone.

And, speaking of excellence in the academy, transformational leadership also has to encourage flexibility in other, even more risky ways if "a new normal" is to become real and more women are to stay and flourish once we come inside. In particular, just as we want to encourage a new collaborative culture in the academy, we also should encourage a new more flexible model of professionalism and of excellence in scholarship. There are a number of interests, styles, commitments that we make academics "check at the door" to fit the mold of distinguished scholar or strong leader, and I believe that this list of tacit benchmarks should be reconsidered. To begin such a dialogue – which we do at some peril, for the outcry will surely be that we are watering down excellence in the process – would be very constructive as we build the "new normal." Here is my list, and others will have their own to add:

- Don't make women or men check their families or their relationships or their passions at the door;
- Don't make any of us check our social identities and our commitments to our many groups and communities at the door;
- Don't define the academy so narrowly as to leave much of the world out of it and eschew the public good that higher education can achieve;
- Don't force a choice between public scholarship and scholarly excellence;
- Don't force young faculty, graduate students, or others newly entering the academy to make a choice between "new scholarship" (be it interdisciplinary or community- or industry-based or otherwise "non-traditional") and "mainstream scholarship," when they may be able to do some of each and the lines may disappear soon anyway;
- Don't rigidly make people pick scholarship or leadership, work or family, or any other roles and identities we pit, for they may be more compatible than we think if we build a new normal of academic culture – I for one, practice social psychology 24x7 in my "day job" as president, and my family is as

present in the daytime as they are in the evenings (albeit not enough in either!).

- Don't define leaders as those who never make mistakes, and thereby force a risk-averse style of leadership that by definition will stall transformation.

As we all band together to build this “new normal,” there is one admonition that I take especially to heart – let's not scrutinize each other as much as the world scrutinizes us.

Vision from Outsider Values

Let me conclude by returning to the epistemic vision that comes with bringing our outsider values inside the academy. And, as Shirley Tilghman reminds us, part of that vision is the rather automatic ways in which we see the world as populated with women ready to be at the table – that is, we quite literally think of women, not just men, when we think of excellence.¹⁸ Not only do we think of a world populated with talented and productive women, we also see quite clearly the practices that keep them out, or the norms that discourage their choice of an academic career in the first place.

Vision. That is what comes with "outsider values." And, this brings me back to Anita Hill, Coleen Rowley, and Sherron Watkins. I like to think of whistle-blowing not just in legal or ethical terms – which it was – but also as a protest against the routine ways in which our institutions structure careers and induce us to act toward others----to compete rather than collaborate, to exclude rather than include – practices that hold us all down. So let's keep helping our numbers increase. And in the meantime, let's fulfill our communal responsibility not to just take our institutions (and our insider status) as given, but to shape what we have in inclusive and empowering ways so our successes will improve the survival of others.

¹⁸See Tilghman (2005).