Establishing a Women Professors Forum

Ursula Keller and Anna Garry

A case study in establishing a successful professional network for advancing women scientists.

For many high-profile businesses honored for their advancement of women, establishing a women's network has proved one essential component of success. A 2012 research survey by the Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons Graduate School of Management, found that such networks—when they are well organized, enjoy the commitment and presence of senior leaders and are valued by the organization—form a necessary part of a multifaceted strategy for the advancement of women.

Since mid-2011, we have worked actively with others at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) Zurich to create a new ETH Women Professors Forum (ETH WPF). The Forum’s membership now includes 80 percent of women professors at ETH and, starting this year, is supported financially by the university. Here, we share some of our experience in establishing this network, and the key factors that we believe have led to its success.

Learning through dialogue and example

Work toward the new women's forum began in summer 2011 within our network, the National Center for Competence in Research, Molecular Ultrafast Science and Technology (NCCR MUST). Our funding body, the Swiss National Science Foundation, requires its scientific research networks to carry out initiatives to address the issue of the gender imbalance in universities. At that time, only 12 percent of the professors at ETH Zurich were female (although subsequent
recruitment efforts are raising that number); moreover, these female professors often did not know one another and, in some cases, were the only women in their departments.

Professor Ursula Keller invited eight senior ETH female professors to meet to discuss creating a professors network, and offered the support of NCCR MUST in implementing that outcome. After that meeting, we organized a series of three lunches in late summer 2011 that brought together 27 women professors who might constitute the potential membership of a women professors network, to listen to and document their needs, interests, issues and concerns.

We also sought to learn from successful examples elsewhere, and found one such model in a 12-year-old women academic association at Yale University, U.S.A. We contacted the organization, the Yale Women Faculty Forum (http://wff.yale.edu), to learn about the key factors in their success and about how they organized the Forum within the university structure. From the start, they had a central, powerful group of female professors driving the initiative, the support of a senior university figure and the funding for an employee to organize the Forum.

By fall 2011, it had become clear that, to be taken seriously within the ETH community, the ETH women professors network would need to become a formal association, on par with others in the university—with a firm commitment from an executive board and members, a documented structure, and written statutes. The nascent executive board of the Forum sought, and gained, permission to use the ETH logo, and the ETH President announced the creation of an ETH Women Professors Forum in December 2011 during his end-of-year ETH Zurich review. ETH WPF was formally established at the beginning of 2012, and—after several months of legal and procedural work, including the voting of an executive board—began recruiting members in May 2012.

Making the Forum work

ETH WPF’s mission, articulated from an early stage, would be to work for its members on issues of access, retention, promotion, influence, collaboration, communication, celebration and environment. It was also stated that ETH WPF “wants to be part of ETH Zurich’s efforts to attract young girls and women to science, retain women scientists, and promote excellent individuals to the highest level of the university.”

A central concept in making the Forum work has been the ETH WPF Scientific Lunch program, designed by an executive board member to enable respectful interaction among ETH women professors, and run successfully each semester since fall 2012. Senior professors are recruited to host
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Each hour-long lunch, with the host professor making a presentation giving insight into her research and the factors for her success. The participation of the senior professors adds an important personal touch, and the subsequent exchange of thoughts following the presentation can be productive, leading to bilateral or broader actions to follow. The lunches also offer a place where female professors can go for advice, given that members of the executive board attend regularly. By January 2013, after the first semester program, membership in ETH WPF had climbed to 70 percent of the university’s female professors.

A further significant factor in ETH WPF was the early engagement with senior decision makers at ETH Zurich. Members of the ETH Zurich executive board invited members of the Forum’s board to a number of discussions on the issues being raised by the nascent Forum. The ETH WPF board also organized an event to give its members a voice in these discussions. In April 2013, the Forum held a one-day retreat in Zurich around issues of recruitment and retention, the career track for assistant professors, and working in a male-dominated environment.

The outcome was a detailed document of recommendations, presented to the university’s governing body on 28 May 2013. At that meeting, ETH WPF requested that it be supported by a new coordinator position, and in July 2013, ETH Zurich decided to invest in a 60-percent position for ETH WPF, based in the ETH Zurich Equal Opportunities Office.

**Lessons learned**

What have been the most important factors in ETH WPF’s growth? We would highlight three in particular:

**Strong early leadership.**

A powerful coordinating group of senior female professors from different disciplines was established early. They committed time and energy to creating an operating framework for the Forum.

**Broad administrative support.**

NCCR MUST provided support by conducting consultation exercises, writing reports, gathering feedback from potential members and ensuring that the activities ran smoothly and that the Forum had a responsive central hub. In July 2012, the Forum’s vice president provided further administrative backup from her team for member recruitment and the Scientific Lunch program.

**The university connection.**

The ETH President’s Delegate for Equal Opportunities was a member of the initial professorial group, as well as the ETH WPF executive board. This meant that the Forum had early access to the ETH President for discussion about the potential role of embedding such an association in the university.

Our experience suggests that creating a formal association within a university can bring enormous dividends—but also that success depends on many factors: engagement of senior leaders (in our case, women professors); designing and implementing professional activities that can specifically advance the careers of the membership; and investing in personnel who can coordinate the initiative to the highest standard. Busy, powerful scientists will not engage without excellence of delivery; therefore, an initial investment in personnel was vital to the success not only of ETH WPF, but of one of its models, the Yale Women Faculty Forum.

ETH Zurich’s decision to engage with and invest in ETH WPF has enabled the Forum to move forward with its vision, increase the visibility of excellent women scientists, and support a new generation of scientists in their careers. Scientific funding bodies increasingly encourage a focus on diversity and advancing minorities in science. We believe that our positive experience in establishing ETH WPF provides a potential model for using funding to make a difference in minority communities.

Ursula Keller (keller@phys.ethz.ch) is with the Institute of Quantum Electronics, Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) Zurich, Switzerland. Anna Garry is the NCCR MUST outreach officer at ETH Zurich.