

## *The Faculty*

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### 'A Culture That Tolerates Discrimination'

**DONNA J. NELSON,**  
associate professor of chemistry,  
University of Oklahoma

**Age:** "I don't want to say. It can impact things like if I'm looking for a job or being nominated for awards. I'm dead serious. Age discrimination is still there."

**Ph.D.:** University of Texas at Austin, 1980

Guggenheim fellow, 2003-04

**Her research:** Uses typical organic chemical reactions to help create molecules useful in biological and materials science.

**Background:** Her father and grandfather were medical doctors in Oklahoma, which she says exposed her to scientific analysis at an early age.

**Personal:** One son, who is majoring in chemical engineering at the University of Oklahoma

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**Q. You presented the first national data showing that major research universities are not hiring female scientists at the same rate that women are earning Ph.D.'s in those fields. For example, you found that women earned 44.7 percent of the Ph.D.'s awarded in biology between 1993 and 2002, but only 30 percent of the assistant professors of biology at top research universities in 2002 were female. What was the most interesting thing you learned from the data?**

**A.** One extremely important thing we found is that the disciplines could be grouped according to what the data revealed. For example, we found that in the biological sciences, in psychology, and in the social sciences — sociology and political science — there is a critical mass of women among the faculty. That's usually regarded as 15 to 30 percent representation. However, in these same fields, there seemed to be a low utilization of women Ph.D. recipients in hiring. So, if you looked at recent Ph.D. recipients and you compared that to the percentage of women among the most-recent hires, there was not a good match. Now, in engineering, you saw the opposite. You do not see a critical mass of women among faculty in engineering, and yet you do see a good match between the percentage of women among recent Ph.D. recipients and among recent hires. So in engineering, the pipeline works. When you get to the physical sciences, they have the worst of both worlds. They don't have the critical mass of women faculty, and they also have the attrition along the pipeline. With these vast differences in the disciplines, we're not going to be able to find one uniform solution to fit all of the problems.

**Q. What prompted you to seek the data in the first place?**

**A.** In my department, I could see certain things happening. A lot of students, they would come into my office, close the door, and start to tell me about their experiences. And a lot of times they'd cry. When you're just talking about the numbers, it's not so hard to sit and be analytical. But when you're actually talking to someone in your office with the door closed and they're telling you the things that were said to them and the things that were done to them, you start to feel a lot more. These numbers become people. Their dreams are broken.

**Q. Do you think your data, or anything else, will help change the situation?**

**A.** It's sort of like we waited too long to make changes. And now, for example, chemistry's got a bad reputation. I do believe that chemistry, if they would have been doing 10 years ago what they're doing now — reaching out the way that they are — it would have made a lot of difference. But when you go to the women chemists' lunch at the American Chemical Society meeting, it's a room filled with thousands of women and they are all talking about their experiences. Bad experiences at one department get shared. I have a suspicion that women are sort of moving out of chemistry and going into materials science and biological sciences, where there are better environments for women.

**Q.** Collecting the data and presenting it in a national forum has made you a leader in efforts to push universities to hire more female scientists. How has that role played out for you, nationally and on your own campus?

**A.** It's affected me in different ways. My activities haven't really been embraced in my own department. It's really a strange situation. Other departments have me in to offer advice and speak to deans and provosts, and leaders of organizations about this. And they tell me that my ideas are very good and they want to try them. I speak constantly. At the end of the year you compile a list of all the talks you've given. It's increased from something like 15 to 50. But here in my own department, they've just sort of ignored it. I think they just want to continue in their own way.

**Q. What about your own experiences. You are a female scientist at one of the nation's top research universities. How did you make it?**

**A.** I had a wonderful Ph.D. mentor. He was inspiring. He included me. And then, I went away to do my postdoc with Herb Brown at Purdue, and Herb Brown was just wonderful. Excellent in every way. I was the first female postdoc he ever hired. I really never experienced any discrimination or being held back. And then I came here to OU. And that's when I started experiencing problems.

**Q. What kinds of things happened to you?**

**A.** There is a culture that tolerates discrimination. So if there's one or two people in your department who will try to do you harm in your career, most of the community will just tolerate it. They'll do nothing. They don't want to get involved.

**Q. What about your personal life? How have you managed to have time for it?**

**A.** My way may have been something that other women don't want to do. I looked around and I didn't see anyone doing what I was doing. I had my son on a Thursday and started going back half-days the following Monday. We put him in a day-care center when he was 8 days old, and he was the only child there with his umbilical cord still partially attached. Back in 1983 when I went to ACS meetings, I took my son with me. I made up my mind "I'm not going to let this hold me back." I brought him into my office here on weekends and at night. By the time he was in high school, he was already doing research in my lab. He gave his first paper at an ACS meeting while he was still a senior in high school.

**Q. How do you spend your free time?**

**A.** In my spare time, I do research on women and minorities in science. That's my hobby. And it's fun. It gives me a great sense of feeling that I'm helping people.

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