

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Society of Women Engineers

110A Engineering Hall, MC 266
1308 West Green Street,
Urbana, IL, 61801



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Dean Adesida:

In November 2007, the University of Illinois section of the Society of Women Engineers launched a new diversity initiative to explore and address gender discrimination within the College of Engineering. In conjunction with the Education Subcommittee of the College of Engineering and Women in Engineering, SWE sent an anonymous online survey that month to all female students in the College to measure the nature and extent of the issues faced by female students. In all, 175 responses were received, representing 15% of the College's 1,154 female students. *Two-thirds* of respondents reported being treated differently at some point in their tenure here, while 43% reported they face such issues *sometimes* to *often*. The survey results would seem to suggest a broad trend of varying discrimination against female students by their peers (68%), in several cases coupled with inaction by authority figures to discourage those actions. *One quarter* of students reported discrimination by faculty and teaching assistants, with a number of these involving inappropriate sexual comments or advances, which can be particularly traumatic given the power faculty and instructional staff hold over grades. Preliminary results from Purdue University, on the other hand, which has invested heavily in gender diversity, show a nearly *opposite trend*, with two-thirds of respondents reporting having *never* experienced being treated differently.

I have enclosed with this letter a detailed report we have compiled on the status of gender diversity within the College of Engineering. This report includes the results of our diversity survey, contextual campus information from the Division of Management Information, and longitudinal degree conferral trends from the Department of Education. Some highlights of the report include a 3% decrease in female dropouts from the College between 2001 and 2007, but a nearly 10% *increase* in females transferring out of the college and a 5% overall *decrease* in female engineering graduates during this period. During the same period, men experienced an *increase* of 10% in retention, with male and female retention rates effectively exchanging places during the past six years.

There is, of course, the unfortunate reality that students arrive on this campus with certain preconceptions and that they tend to take action based on those beliefs. However, as Chancellor Herman's Inclusive Illinois initiative illustrates, it is our responsibility as an institution to educate and enlighten our students to appreciate difference, whether it is related to race, gender, or culture, and above all to promote tolerance. As Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Renee Romano put it recently, it is our duty as an institution to provide a "welcoming campus for all students." However, as it turns out, many of the steps needed to make the College of Engineering more welcome to female students will also have a positive effect on all students' success once they leave the University. When asked at the 2007 Inaugural Lincoln Symposium what University of Illinois students can do to increase their chances of success in the workforce, James Owens, Chairman and CEO of Caterpillar, Inc. specifically addressed the issue of diversity. He noted that in the increasingly-globalized world of engineering, workers collaborate with colleagues from many backgrounds with potentially disjoint beliefs and customs. Engineers must have a strong appreciation of other cultures and of those

different from themselves to successfully engage in this new workplace paradigm. His comments were echoed by David Speer, Chairman and CEO of Illinois Tool Works, Inc., and William Osborn, President and CEO of The Northern Trust Company. Working to improve diversity appreciation within the College of Engineering not only helps female students in the immediate term, but encourages those same traits most valued by employers today. It is therefore of critical importance that we imbue our students with this appreciation on top of their solid academic foundation, providing them a competitive advantage in the workforce.

We would like to ask for your help, as Dean of the College of Engineering, to work with us to address these issues and find solutions that will make *all* students in the College feel welcome. In particular, Purdue University has undertaken an extensive diversity program over the past decade that has been extremely successful at improving female engineering enrollment and retention at that institution. One of the cornerstones of their initiative, EPICS, has won numerous awards and is regarded as a national model, with branches now operating on 15 campuses. While other institutions, like Carnegie Mellon University, have also launched extremely successful diversity programs, Purdue's similarity to our institution, its geographic proximity, and the way in which it has formed a national consortium around portions of its initiative make it an ideal model for us to look to. Indeed, Provost Katehi herself served as Dean of the Purdue College of Engineering before joining the Illinois community. We therefore ask the assistance of your office, perhaps in conjunction with Provost Katehi's office, to invite the Dean of Engineering at Purdue and her staff to visit our university in April of this year for a series of roundtable discussions to learn more about Purdue's efforts in this area and explore possible applications and collaborations of those efforts on our own campus. By making the College a more welcoming place for female engineers, we teach our students the virtues of difference, tolerance, collaboration, and teamwork, all of which are critically important to engineers in the 21st century.

Sincerely,

Jessica Wood
President

Enc:

Status and Summary of Gender Diversity in the College of Engineering

CC:

Professor Susan Larson (Women in Engineering)
Provost Linda Katehi