

The Experiences of Female Faculty Members in A School of Engineering: A Canadian Perspective

D. Este¹ and Q. Sun²

¹ Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Canada

² Schulich School of Engineering, University of Calgary, Canada

Summary In Canada, there is an increasing need for schools/faculties of engineering to recruit and retain female faculty members, who offer diverse perspectives, approaches and lived experiences. Greater gender equity within these institutions will enrich learning environments and shape innovation in engineering.

1. Relevance

Despite efforts to promote equity across Canadian universities, research focusing on the unique perspectives of women within schools/faculties of engineering in Canada is extremely scarce. As a result, several scholars note the need for further research, particularly in hearing about the unique experiences of female engineering faculty members.

2. Aims & Objectives

The primary objective of the study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of female faculty members in a large school of engineering located in Western Canada. A second objective is to explore what services and supports female engineering faculty members require in order to achieve success as scholars, and also to ensure strong rates of retention. Collectively, these two objectives will fill a void in the research literature and improve workplace environments for this particular group of academics.

3. Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with ten faculty members from a school of engineering at a Western Canadian university. This interviewing format was selected as it provides the interviewer with considerable flexibility in exploring the focus of the interview. The interviews explored an array of topics (relationships with peers, department heads, supports and services, incidents of sexism and/or racism) among female faculty members. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, which served as the foundation for the thematic analysis of the data we conducted.

4. Results

Based on our interviews, the following salient themes emerged: 1) strategies to increase the competitiveness of individual female faculty members such as mentorship and targeted grants; 2) initiatives are required to create more flexible and family-friendly environments, such as spousal hiring practices and after-hour child care centres, which provide quality care; 3) processes are needed to help reduce the sense of isolation female engineering faculty members experience when they embark on their academic careers; and 4) a need for organizational interventions designed to reduce negative feelings and behaviours that may be directed against female faculty members.

5. Conclusions

Virtually all schools/faculties of engineering in Canada are engaged in recruitment efforts designed to attract more women to become faculty members in these institutions. Our study provides insights about the experiences of female faculty members in a school of engineering. Hence, we contend that this work is quite congruent with the overall purpose of the Gender Summit.

6. Contact details: Dr. David Este, deste@ucalgary.ca