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STAFF EDITORIAL: The Gender Gap

Female professors continue to face discrimination.

October 01, 2004

Not many Columbia students have heard of Graciela Chichilnisky, but her name is well known to many administrators. In 1991, Chichilnisky, a Columbia professor for almost 25 years, filed a class action lawsuit against Columbia, claiming that the University discriminated against women. The suit was settled in 1995 when Columbia paid Chichilnisky \$500,000 and increased her salary by \$60,000.

However, Chichilnisky's legal battles with Columbia continued. In 2002, during hearings for another trial, she argued that her salary was still less than 50% of the average for a male tenured professor. Her case against Columbia continues to this day.

Chichilnisky's troubles are only an extreme version of what Columbia's female faculty face every day. A report by the Columbia Student Senate found that female Ph.D. students have a higher attrition rate than men. It found that Columbia attracts "substantially less than its share" of female junior applicants, preventing women from beginning careers at Columbia. It also found that tenured faculty hired from outside Columbia, more than half of new appointees, "are only half as likely to be female as are candidates promoted from within the University." Over the 10 years studied, the natural sciences added 11 professors in this fashion. None were women.

This discrimination is not unique to Columbia. What makes it different from other schools is its refusal to admit it has a problem. At MIT, a 1999 report by two female professors revealed that the administration had unintentionally but continually discriminated against women in hiring. An 11-member faculty panel at Princeton reported recently that almost one quarter of women felt that their colleagues' behavior was "occasionally or frequently unprofessional," and that they were excluded from professional activities. As Nancy Hopkins, the leader of the MIT study, observed, "Most universities willing to be as honest as Princeton would make very similar findings."

Columbia must act—first by admitting it has a problem, then by doing something about it. The new position of vice provost for diversity initiatives, currently held by Jean Howard, should be made permanent and given meaningful powers. Although professors' official salaries are currently published, professors are also paid with a variety of perks—just ask the doormen at Jeffrey Sachs' Columbia-financed apartment. Howard needs to make these hidden payments public. The culture of the University—where not too long ago, according to Chichilnisky, one female professor recalls being told, "You are a nice woman, why don't you stop complaining about pay and get married?"—needs to be changed. An independent commission, staffed by people like Howard who have proven their veracity and integrity, should be established so that Columbia's practices can be revealed.

These problems cannot be resolved quickly. But that doesn't change reality: right here, right

now, nothing is being done.��

