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Cal Poly Professor Awarded \$100,000 NSF Grant

SAN LUIS OBISPO – A professor in Cal Poly’s Psychology and Child Development Department and a colleague at Lafayette College in Easton, Penn. have been awarded a \$100,000 National Science Foundation grant to study women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields.

Cal Poly’s Jasna Jovanovic and Mary Armstrong, associate professor of English and chair of the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at Lafayette College, will look specifically at reasons underrepresented women have not kept pace with the majority of women in STEM fields. Armstrong was chair of the Cal Poly’s Women’s and Gender Studies Department from 2000-09.

The grant was awarded as part of NSF’s ADVANCE program, founded in 2000 to increase the participation and advancement of women in academic science and engineering careers.

Over the last decade, the number of women in most academic STEM positions has increased; however, women in underrepresented groups -- which include race, ethnicity, disability status and sexual orientation -- have not.

“For example, most women of color are not typically present in academic STEM fields in proportion to their presence in the general population, and women of color in STEM positions have not grown in proportion to the increased numbers of the majority of women,” Jovanovic said. “The goal of our grant is to contribute to the research on why underrepresented women have not kept pace with the majority of women by examining the institutional mechanisms that try to promote the entry, retention and success of underrepresented women in academic STEM fields.”

Jovanovic and Armstrong will study some recent institutional programs funded by ADVANCE. They will work with these institutions to better understand and improve the programs intended to increase underrepresented women in STEM. Studying the kinds of programs that address issues of concern to underrepresented women, the pair will look at what the obstacles are for initiatives that address such concerns; what enables such programs; the point at which issues pertaining to underrepresented women get addressed; and what institutional form that takes.

“We are especially interested in the factors that make an institution able to create programs and initiatives that support underrepresented women in STEM,” Jovanovic said. “Our ultimate goal is to identify and share these factors with other institutions.”

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