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Editorial

Women ChEs: Making Progress, Continually Striving

How'm I doin'?" was the mantra of a former New York City mayor, Ed Koch. Similarly, "How're we doin'?" is something that women engineers often contemplate — their progress, their status, and their prospects. We hope that the special supplement in this issue will shed some light on this question, serve as a starting point for discussion, and inspire women chemical engineers to achieve their career dreams.

Some people are looking at Title IX, which prohibits discrimination in education based on gender, as a way to address gender issues in the sciences and engineering (Washington Update, p. 19).

Irene Kim points out (pp. 34S–37S) that women have made progress in increasing their presence in industry, representation among corporate management, relative earnings, and ability to command respect for professional accomplishments while sacrificing less of their personal lives. It's also clear, she says, that women have not yet achieved total equity in the engineering workforce. But, the trends are moving in the right direction, even if it is more slowly than many would like.

Donna Nelson, an associate professor of chemistry at the Univ. of Oklahoma, shares the results of her recent surveys of engineering and science faculties (pp. 38S–41S). She found that about 10% of all chemical engineering faculty are women and that women are fairly well-represented at the lower ranks (assistant and associate professor), although there is still a disparity between the number of women receiving PhDs and the number who get hired onto university faculties and promoted. Quite interestingly, her statistics dispel the myth that the academic environment is harsher for women in engineering than in the sciences.

We also profile six high-level women in industry and academia to show you how they got where they are today and what it's like to be a successful woman in a male-dominated field (pp. 42S–47S). While their stories are different, they do have several things in common. They spoke about standing out as a woman in a sea of men and the added scrutiny they felt, as well as the need to work harder than their male colleagues to prove themselves. Yet they didn't talk about "problems" — rather, they all spoke of challenges and opportunities. They agree that "we've come a long way, baby!" and that we can look forward to a bright and diverse future.

Employers can play a role in fostering that diverse future. Recently, we asked you to tell us about companies that are leaders at retaining women engineers. Several readers enthusiastically nominated their employers and told us about flexible work schedules, family leave programs, dependent care benefits, career development opportunities and — most importantly — cultures that encourage employees to make the most of such offerings. Be sure to check out next month's issue, where we will profile some of those organizations.

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