Office launches program to address gender issues

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The women of Purdue who constituted 42 percent of Purdue’s 1995-96 student population may have thought they were pretty lucky as they walked around a campus where men dominated in numbers, but national statistics give evidence to think otherwise.

The University Task Force on Women’s Issues released an 86-page handbook in the spring titled “The Status of Women at Purdue University.” The handbook supplied national statistics from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program that showed 43.5 percent of women consider themselves confident, whereas 57.1 percent of men do. Twenty-four-and-a-half percent of women expect to participate in extracurricular activities in college, vs. 48.1 percent of men.

Purdue’s own statistics show similar trends with a decreasing percentage of women receiving advanced degrees and administrative positions at Purdue. For example, 45 percent of women receive undergraduate degrees and represent 19 percent of the faculty.

Upon publication of “The Status of Women at Purdue University,” the director of the Women’s Resource Office, Becky Herrnstein, launched a new program called Women in Touch. The program was designed to provide a network of women across departments and schools. The meetings will allow women the opportunity to meet and express their concerns about the status of women at Purdue. Herrnstein wants to “provide a safe place for women to share concerns without fear of offending their fellow colleagues and classmates.”

Herrnstein is an advocate for women but also for equal rights and equal opportunities. She said, “I’m really offended by people who behave like bullies. I think women, and others, are sometimes silenced ... I want people to have a fair shot without some bully in their way.”

Women in Touch hopes to gather information about what is silencing women and why more women don’t pursue higher degrees and administrative positions. “We want to know how we could make it easier for women to balance work and family issues,” Herrnstein said. Women in Touch will have informal meetings at noon on Nov. 7 and 21 in Room B2 in Stone Hall to discuss the status of women faculty and students at Purdue. Herrnstein hopes that faculty and students from all schools will come and share their concerns.

“I think it (Women in Touch) is a wonderful program, much needed and appreciated,” said Tara Kent, graduate assistant at the Women’s Resource Office. Her role as graduate assistant is to “try and bridge the gap between the administration and the students.” Kent said it is amazing to listen to the stories and concerns of women at Purdue and she is hoping that the program will have a big impact on the status of women at Purdue.

One concern of the Women’s Resource Office that will be addressed at Women in Touch is how to create a more comfortable classroom climate. Together the Women in Engineering and Women in Science programs developed a series of campus climate workshops for faculty and teaching assistants. The purpose of the programs is to decrease gender bias and sexist attitudes in the classroom. Although no statistical evidence pertaining to gender bias in Purdue’s classrooms has been produced, national statistics show that it should be a concern for all teaching institutions. Women in Touch is hoping to get strong feedback concerning the conditions of Purdue’s classrooms and the effectiveness of the campus climate workshops.

In the spring, Women in Touch will meet again as a follow-up to their fall programs. Herrnstein will respond to the concerns discussed in the fall meetings and provide updated information on the status of women at Purdue and the progress of the Women’s Resource Office.

• For more information pertaining to Women in Touch or the services of the Women’s Resource Office, contact Becky Herrnstein at 494-9879 or e-mail her at bherrnstein@humanrel.purdue.edu.