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A woman who reached for the sky helped women reach for the stars

By France A. Córdova (Photo attached)
President of Purdue University

Amelia Earhart has long inspired young women to pursue their dreams, even if they face obstacles to their goals and especially if those dreams will take them beyond traditional careers.

Interest around the world in the aviatrix is sure to be renewed with the opening of the film "Amelia" this weekend (Oct. 23). And another generation of girls, through the legacy of Amelia Earhart's story, will get a lesson in believing in themselves and in what they accomplish.

Before she left on her second and ill-fated attempt at a world flight in 1937, Earhart spent two years on Purdue's West Lafayette, Ind., campus as a career counselor to hundreds of students, mostly women. A few of those young women were motivated to pursue flight, but she encouraged even more to consider a wide range of then non-traditional careers, especially in science and engineering.

As a female scientist, I know how important it can be to have a role model to follow. Amelia Earhart was one of mine, long before I arrived on the Purdue campus as president.

When I was a high school student in the 1960s, I loved science. But it wasn't a "woman's career," so my parents and teachers advised me not to study science as a college undergrad. Then Purdue alumnus Neil Armstrong landed Apollo 11 on the moon. That historic moment -- and the inspiration of Amelia Earhart -- refocused my career aspirations on the stars. I eventually earned a doctorate in astrophysics.

Women have made strides in all areas of science and engineering. According to National Science Foundation statistics, the number of women earning bachelor's degrees in science and engineering increased from about 50,000 in 1966 to nearly 240,000 in 2006. Women made up 43 percent of science and engineering graduate students in 2006, up from 39 percent in 1996. During that time, the number of women science and engineering graduate students increased in every field except computer sciences.

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Still, in 2006, women held 1.3 million jobs in science and engineering, a third of the 3.7 million held by men. That means plenty of opportunity for women in these fields. Science and engineering careers offer the chance to make new discoveries and to make a difference in the world.

These jobs are fulfilling and also pay well. NSF numbers show that scientists and engineers earned a median salary of $75,000 in 2006, compared to $59,000 for other occupations.

More women in these fields will mean more role models for girls. In today's world of aeronautics and astronautics, 22 women are modern-day Amelia Earharts, serving as NASA astronauts. They include two women who launched from Purdue to become leaders in space exploration: Purdue grads Janice Voss, (BS '75, engineering science) a current astronaut; and Mary Ellen Weber, (BS '84, chemical engineering) a former astronaut.

At Purdue, aviation technology students Juliana Lindner and Lauren Steele decided to become pilots before they could drive cars. Think how much that would please Amelia Earhart. She would be as thrilled as today's generations of young women, who are inspired at the sound of a female captain's voice from the cockpit.

I'm certain that Amelia Earhart would be proud of today's women aviators and scientists and engineers.

In the 1930s, she predicted that there would come a day when people would be judged by aptitude and society would "stop blocking off certain things as suitable to men and suitable to women." That is so much truer today, in no small part due to the inspiring life she led and the legacy she left behind.

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