

## **A Collegiate External Women’s Advisory Committee: Origins and the Development of a Strategic Plan**

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Nicole Smith is the Chief of the Exploration Systems Office at NASA Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio. She most recently was the project manager for Artemis I Testing at NASA’s Plum Brook Station. She has been with NASA for 20 years. She has a BA in Mathematics and Statistics and a BS in Aeronautics from Miami University, and an MS in Aerospace Engineering from the University of Cincinnati. She has worked engineering, mission operations, and program management for the International Space Station and Orion Programs at both NASA’s Johnson Space Center and Glenn Research Center, with a brief tenure on Capitol Hill in 2011-2012 as the Aerospace and Manufacturing legislative fellow for the senior senator from Ohio. In her free time she enjoys mentoring women in STEM, hiking, biking, reading, and traveling to see the world.

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Flavors and Fragrances) prior to his current role. He served on the executive committee of the ASEE Women in Engineering division from 2010 to present.

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## Abstract

Gender diversity increases collaboration [1] enables better and more creative problem solving leading to greater innovation [2] and improved financial performance [3]. Despite these and other well documented benefits of gender diversity, women continue to be underrepresented in engineering and computing [4]. In 2019, white women represented approximately 28.3%, the U.S Population aged 18 -24 (traditional college aged), and women of color represented approximately 20.6% of this demographic. In Engineering, neither group achieves demographic parity as women of color were awarded only 7.6% of the engineering undergraduate degrees compared to 12.6% awarded to white women and 79.1% awarded to men of all races [5]. Efforts to achieve gender parity often overlook the impact of racial and ethnic differences among women in STEM, marginalizing women of color in the literature about resolving women’s underrepresentation in male-dominated STEM fields [6]. This paper describes how alumnae of Miami University in Oxford, OH, worked with their alma mater to form an external Women’s Advisory Committee to the College of Engineering and Computing. The group chartered a mission to “provide leadership in a collaborative environment with faculty, staff, students, alumni and others to improve recruitment, retention and graduation support for women in engineering and computing...”. Members of the Committee engage with the College regularly and give both guidance and action to efforts related to student success for women students and faculty.

Recently, the Committee embarked on the development of a strategic plan to maximize the impact of the volunteers and to leverage their unique strengths to support the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts of the College. The strategic planning process is detailed here, including the methodology, the time frame, the prioritization of activities, and the outcomes. Details are provided on the undertakings for the Committee including mentorship, mentorship training, promotion and marketing of women alumni from the College’s academic programs, and a collaborative retention plan with the College. Approaches are shared on best practices for organizing, focusing, and obtaining consensus on priorities. The work of the committee could be a model for other colleges and universities to develop on their own, especially in situations where school size and resource allocations may not allow the fullest range of women-focused offices and initiatives.

## Introduction

The World Economic Forum boldly stated in 2019 that “The business case for diversity in the workplace is now overwhelming” [7]. Studies have shown that increased diversity in an organization’s leadership influences decision-making, strategy, and responsiveness to change in ways that increase growth, productivity, and revenues [8]. In a study performed by the Boston Consulting Group, companies with more diverse leadership have 19% higher revenues due to innovation [7]. Understanding the link between innovation and diversity is meaningful and

important for employers of engineers and computing professionals including technical organizations, start-ups and industries where innovation is the key to growth. It shows that diversity is not just a business goal, it is an integral part of a successful revenue-generating business.

Studies that focus on the dimensions of diversity have shown a significant relationship between gender diversity and increased financial performance including larger profit margins, return on investment, sales growth, and stock share price performance [9]. More balanced gender composition within organizations has been linked with innovation [8], [10], [11], [12], [13].

Yet women continue to be underrepresented in every engineering and computing profession. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2020 women comprised 47% of the workforce and only 27% of computing and information systems managers, 10% of architectural and engineering Managers, 21% of computer programmers, 19% of software developers, 9% of computer network architects, 12% of aerospace engineers, 19% of chemical engineers, 16% of civil engineers, 18% of computer hardware engineers, 12% of electrical and electronic engineers, 9% of mechanical engineers [14]. By industry women are overrepresented in education and healthcare, comprising 75% of the workforce, but only 29% in manufacturing, 24% of the transportation and utilities industries, and 11% of the construction industry [15].

Much of the low representation in the professions is a direct result of the number of students recruited to, retained within, and graduating from schools of engineering and computing. In its latest report on science and engineering indicators, the National Science Foundation reports that within engineering women received 20% of bachelor's degrees, 25% of master's degrees and 23% of doctoral degrees. In the computer and mathematical sciences, women received 25% of bachelor's degrees, 33% of master's and 25% of doctoral degrees [4].

The continuing underrepresentation of women in engineering and computing has been described as a complex problem that can and will be solved by applying novel approaches. [16]. Miami University's College of Computing and Engineering recognized the need for novel approaches and sought out the expertise of its alumni to support its efforts to increase gender diversity. An advisory committee was formed to provide leadership and support aimed at improving recruitment, retention, and graduation for women in engineering and computing. Alumni who identify as women were recruited as volunteers to form and direct the advisory committee. Members include representation from each decade including alumnae from the 1970's to the 2010's.

This paper begins by explaining the origins of the committee and the evolution of the committee's mission. Next the efforts to develop a strategic plan are discussed. Included is a discussion of the methodology used to create the strategic plan, along with details regarding how the process evolved as it included committee members from across the United States. Finally, the results to date of the work are detailed and suggestions are provided for creating these types of committees at other institutions of higher learning.

## Committee Origins and Evolution

In 2014, two alumnae (systems analysis majors circa 1970s) met with the Dean and other College of Engineering and Computing (CEC) leadership to discuss the underrepresentation of women as enrolled students. The CEC leadership shared these concerns but expressed lack of financial and temporal resources to resolve it. One alumna made a substantial donation to the CEC and started the Women's Advisory Committee to fund staff and help address this disparity. The committee was introduced to the greater CEC Advisory Council in 2015 and the initial presentation proposed introducing a Humanitarian Engineering minor to appeal to women via altruism. This proposition was insightfully challenged by another CEC alumna (circa 1990s) who expressed concerns that this would pull existing women away from high-paying engineering jobs and into positions with little power and influence. She motivated further that all engineers should have a concept of the human as a final user. This alumna's opinion was valued and she was invited to join the committee. This conversation, however, introduced a challenge that would be ever present within the committee: how do you effectively recruit and retain women without stereotyping gender roles and interests? This is a complex question that the committee soon identified had a generational element to both the approach and proposed solution. Ultimately in 2017, the committee charter was amended to include a larger committee membership and to solicit nominations spanning five decades of alumnae, with aspirations of representing diverse backgrounds and most of the departments within the CEC to acknowledge the impact of intersectionality on all women and to give the committee a wider world view.

From the committee's founding it struggled to find certainty in its direction. The evolution of the committee, thus, was not linear and the journey to affecting real change presented unique challenges. One difficulty was locating and consolidating the relevant research and experts across the University and leveraging those resources in our efforts. In 2016, the committee interfaced with the Psychology department in a discussion titled "Gender, Work and Leadership", which was focused on best practices to engage and retain women and minoritized individuals in STEM. The committee created and leveraged personal relationships via grassroots campaigns to recruit, matriculate, retain, and support women students in the CEC. For example, committee members began a letter writing campaign, writing to high school senior girls who had been accepted to the engineering program encouraging them to enroll. The committee members began conducting outreach at their respective local high schools, and represented the University at the TechOlympics, one of the largest annual gatherings of STEM-interested high school students in the metropolitan area and state. The committee met with University staff regarding opportunities for their involvement in recruitment efforts and mentoring of alumnae, but nothing eventuated. Once women enrolled in the CEC, the committee continued support by hosting lunch with the students we previously wrote, and speed mentoring with the Society of Women Engineers chapter and other women-led campus engineering groups. As the committee sought to also support recent alumnae, a journal was created containing a collection of letters of support from the committee members, and was gifted to all women graduating from the CEC. The aforementioned strategies were good initial steps towards our vision of matriculating, retaining and supporting women students in the CEC towards increasing the population of women students within the College.

In 2019 the College began a search for a new Dean and one of the committee members served on the search committee as an industry advisory council representative. This search ended with the appointment of the first woman Dean of the CEC, and a champion for diversity, equity and

inclusion efforts. Five years after the committee's founding, however, the population of women students is still between 20-25%. Despite grand efforts and various accomplishments, the disparity had not significantly changed. We were certain that we have impacted the experiences of women currently enrolled in the program, and influenced the selection of a Dean that would facilitate cultural change, but we sought a concerted direction and direct actions to realize our initial goals of increasing the number of women enrolled in the CEC. The committee hired a consultant who specializes in the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women in STEM to facilitate the development of a strategic plan for the committee. The work included is detailed below.

## Method

Once the decision was made to develop a strategic plan, the process to develop the plan began. The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process was chosen as it leverages the strengths of the organization or group to design a path forward. AI offers an approach to organizational development and change that is positive and forward thinking [17].

The steps of the appreciative inquiry process for groups embarking on change are discovery, dream, design, and destiny [18]. Discovery is identifying the positive attributes of the group, including characteristics, accomplishments, individual skills, and group competencies.

The dream phase is imagining the possibilities for the future. The group works collaboratively to articulate the vision of the future organization. Building on the vision, the third phase is to design the future. The design includes the strategies, goals, objectives, accountability, responsibilities that comprise the future organization.

The destiny or deliver phase moves into the implementation of the vision. Progress is monitored and individuals are held accountable by leadership to deliver results. The cycle can be repeated as often as possible. Usually, a strategic plan is updated every two to five years.

An additional step to the established AI phases was added for the Women's Advisory Committee. A definition phase was added to clearly articulate the scope and boundaries of the strategic plan.

## Results

The unique status of the group as an advisory committee to the Dean, made up entirely of volunteers was perhaps the greatest challenge for developing a strategic plan. As an advisory committee the group had free reign to advise on any topic but had no control over what was implemented within the college.

To begin the definition phase, a series of interviews were conducted individually by the facilitator. These interviews sought to understand how each committee member viewed their role, the work of the committee, and what their suggestions for improvement were. A series of questions and probes were prepared prior to the first interview and were asked of each member. These are detailed in the Appendix. The interviews were conducted over a two-week period in

2020 using Google Meet or Cisco WebEx. The duration of each interview was between 30 minutes and one hour. Copious notes were taken by the interviewer. Themes and patterns within and across the interviews were extracted and used as the basis for the findings and recommendations.

Findings from the initial interviews included a need for an updated mission that is specific, succinct, and executable by the committee. Along with the updated mission, the members discussed their individual roles as mostly supportive, and they expressed a desire to do more. The impact of the committee's initiatives is important to the members and they expressed a desire to know their efforts are making a difference in the experiences of the women students and graduates of their alma mater. Using metrics to measure progress was an idea suggested by many to ensure the work of the committee was aligned to the mission.

One notable success of the committee's work to date was identified as the mentoring program. This program was believed to be an important on-going initiative for the committee and all wanted the work to be continued and expanded.

In summary, the interviews found that the committee is comprised of volunteers who are passionate about increasing the representation of women in engineering and computing as well as supporting women in the STEM professions. The volunteers have successfully navigated engineering or computing as a college major and in the workplace. They want to make an impact and give back to the university where they got their start.

Recommendations for moving forward included the following:

1. Updating the mission of the committee.
2. Before undertaking an initiative, the committee should
  - a. Ensure the initiative leverages the unique strengths and expertise of the committee members.
  - b. Determine what success would look like and/or how to measure success in terms of the impact on women students and/or graduates in/of the university.
  - c. Focus only on initiatives that have a measurable impact.
3. Continue the development of the mentoring program. Add additional committee members to this sub-committee. Train the mentors and leverage the program to identify additional ways to provide support to current students.
4. Continue to meet in the fall as a full committee. Develop a plan to make the monthly meetings more productive.

The first and most important recommendation was to develop a specific, succinct, and executable mission for the committee. After a series of discussions with the committee members the following mission was adopted.

The Women's Advisory Committee works to increase the number of women in engineering and computing by:

- Developing and implementing programs that increase the retention of women students and support lifelong career success for our graduates.
- Sponsoring, supporting, and advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

## Discovery

The appreciative inquiry process uses a strengths-based approach to identify the current state of the group. Since the strategic plan was being developed during 2020 with the constraints of the pandemic, a survey method was used to efficiently collect the information from the members on the strengths of the committee. Ten of the fourteen committee members responded to the question and prompts including “What are the strengths of the committee? What is the committee doing really well? What are the best things about the way the committee has worked together? What are the personal strengths and competencies that you admire in the committee members?”

From the responses, the following were identified as the strengths of the advisory committee and its volunteers. The volunteers are passionate about supporting women, especially those in engineering and computing. They believe in lifelong career development of women and the importance of the education. Increasing the representation of women in STEM and in leadership is a strength as well as helping their alma mater to support the achievement of women.

The committee is all women who bring a diversity of thought, experience in STEM education and in the workplace, age, degrees, careers, industries and life outside of career (families, caretaking responsibilities etc.).

Strong networks and connections, both individually and collectively are a strength, as well as a commitment to the university with a desire to support current students and graduates. The volunteers are talented leaders who are respectful of each other. They are creative and innovative and able to brainstorm and work together to make and execute a plan. The committee’s leader is very kind-hearted.

The committee is good at considering intersectionality and diversity when discussing goals specifically related to international students, students of color, and LGBTQ students. The members believe that the committee is a safe space to make a recommendation or share an idea.

Additional strengths include communication, collaboration, adaptability, critical thinking, system thinking, and complex problem solving. The committee members are open-minded and enthusiastic.

## Dream

Following the define and discovery phases, the next step in developing the strategic was for the committee to envision what might be, building on the identified strengths of the committee. A facilitated discussion via Cisco WebEx was leveraged to compile the vision of each individual. Next these individual responses were integrated into a shared vision for the committee.

For the facilitated discussion, the volunteers were asked “If anything was possible, what would the university, the college of engineering and computing and the women advisory committee be like in the future?” Additionally, they were asked to consider the recently developed mission



while leveraging the strengths of the committee. The facilitator also reminded the committee members to be respectful of what is and was within the control of the advisory committee.

The committee provided considerable input that was distilled to the following vision.

#### Vision

- Our University is the BEST place for women in engineering and computing because it leverages world class best practices to recruit, retain, and graduate women, setting alumni up for lifelong success.
- On our journey to achieve equity for women, the Women's Advisory Committee continues to be a resource to the administration, faculty, students, and graduates.
- Recruitment Vision: Incoming classes in the college include women at world class levels of representation,
- Retention Vision: Retention of women students in the college is equal to that of the male students and is at world class levels because intentional strategies are leveraged that specifically support the retention of women in engineering and computing, while at the university and as they move forward in their careers.
- Vision for Women Alumni: Employers proactively recruit our graduates, especially the women. Networking and collaboration continue with alumni and the faculty, students, and administration because of their excellent experience as an undergraduate.

#### Design

In the design phase of the appreciative inquiry process the plan is developed in detail, including specifying strategic objectives, goals, accountability, and responsibilities of committee members.

For the design phase, the committee developed three strategic objectives:

1. Develop and implement programs that increase the retention of women students.
2. Develop and implement programs that support lifelong career success for women alumni.
3. Sponsor, support, and advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at the university that promote the success of women connected to engineering and computing.

Based on the mission, the three strategic objectives, and considering the strengths of the committee as well as the vision, a list of possible projects was developed. Each committee member ranked these projects. The timeline for focusing on each project was developed based on the priorities. These projects are summarized on the timeline shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Strategic Plan Timeline



## Deliver

The last phase of the strategic planning process is to deliver results and monitor progress. Currently the work is continuing on the three highest priority projects. These are the mentoring program, metrics development, and publicizing the committee to important stakeholders. Once the priorities were established, committee members selected the subcommittee on which they preferred to serve. A leader for each subcommittee was appointed, and subcommittee refined their goals, timelines, resource requirements and accountability.

The mentoring program was established prior to the development of the strategic plan. All believed that this work should continue. Initially the program was setup to recruit and train women alumni to support student success. A recommendation from the strategic planning was that the mentoring subcommittee add members and take on the challenge of establishing a peer-to-peer mentoring program for the students. This would allow junior and senior students in engineering and computing to mentor freshmen and sophomores. The work has continued and has led to the development of networks for both students and volunteer alumni.

A new sub-committee established during the strategic planning is focused on developing metrics to monitor the efforts of the advisory committee. Working with the university departments including admissions, this sub-committee is establishing baselines on recruitment and retention. Also included are outcomes for graduating students, working with the college of engineering and computing to include gender in the student surveys.

The third high priority sub-committee established by the strategic planning is focused on showcasing and publicizing the work the advisory committee to important stakeholders. These include faculty, students, administration and alumni who are critical in recruitment, retention,

and the long-term success of women in engineering and computing. The work of this subcommittee includes creating a web page with details on the committee members, the mission, vision and accomplishments of the committee. Additionally, the subcommittee is working to provide speakers and additional volunteers to serve as role models to students, particularly women students.

## Conclusion

Here we present the origins of a multigenerational diverse women's advisory committee composed of volunteer alumnae from the College of Engineering and Computing at Miami University in Oxford, OH. We share the process of developing a strategic plan by leveraging the strengths of the women's committee via the appreciate inquiry process. The committee defined its own scope through a series of individual interviews which analyzed the state of the group and ultimately yielded the discovery of specific and executable committee mission. The committee dreamt of what it might be in the future, holding the assumption that traditional barriers of implementation were removed. The committee then designed a detailed plan for possible projects including strategic objectives, goals, accountability and responsibilities for all committee members. The final and ongoing phase of the strategic planning process is to deliver results and monitor progress. To date, this women's committee is developing and measuring metrics to monitor the effectiveness of their ongoing efforts (i.e.: alumnae to student mentoring program, peer-to-peer mentoring program, recruitment and retention, graduate success). In addition to monitoring effectiveness the committee also showcases and publicizes the Women's Advisory Committee's work to key stakeholders. This is an ongoing effort that we hope to share the impact of in future investigations. At this time, we encourage other institutions to leverage their alumnae community and follow the steps detailed in this paper to systematically shift the culture of Universities' engineering colleges to recruit and retain more students who identify as women.

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## Appendix

### Initial Interview Questions and Prompts

1. Tell me about yourself and your involvement in the College of Engineering and Computing Women's Advisory Committee?
  - Specify your connection to Miami University.
  - Who and or what brought you to the committee?
  - How have you viewed your role?
2. What do you believe the mission or purpose of the committee is?
3. What results would you like to achieve?
  - If all of these results were achieved, what would the College of Engineering & Computing be like in 5 years? 10 years? 15 years?
  - For the women students and graduates?
4. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
5. Do you have any questions for me?

- About the interview or anything I said during the interview.
- Regarding the strategic planning process.