



\$3.3 million NSF grant promotes UIC women in science, engineering

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[Paul Francuch](#)

Claudia Morrissey, left, and Mrinalini Rao: recommendations include making the work climate friendlier for women.

Photo: Roberta Dupuis-Devlin

Under-representation of women faculty in engineering and science, especially among minorities, is a national problem urgently in need of a creative solution — one that may be found in a UIC program called [WISEST](#), for Women in Science and Engineering System Transformation.

The National Science Foundation, which gave the initiative seed money three years ago, just awarded WISEST a \$3.3 million, five-year grant.

“UIC’s location and mission make it a good model for developing a gender-equitable and diverse faculty body,” said [Mrinalini Rao](#), professor of physiology and biophysics and vice provost for faculty affairs, who is lead investigator.

“Its rich and diverse student population is eager to have sufficient role models.”

Female tenured or tenure-track professors in UIC’s 11 science and engineering departments range from 0 percent in chemical engineering to 32 percent in biology; there is only one female department head. Consequently, female role models for students are scarce to non-existent, Rao said.

Earlier findings by Rao and others suggest a major obstacle the university faces is transforming its hiring culture and work environment to attract more women to faculty careers.

WISEST recommendations include increasing the accountability of deans and department heads for gender equity, cluster hiring when a department has fewer than three female professors and expanding campus child care to include infant care.

Through the project, these recommendations will be publicized to all employees in an effort to make everyone fully aware of what is or is not allowed and to minimize any sense of isolation.

Administrators will make a concerted effort to move women faculty members into more leadership positions, raise their visibility in the academic world and eliminate pay disparities.

“There have not been adequate resources for dealing with issues such as making the work climate friendlier for women, without a sense of isolation,” said Rao.

“Having strong leaders of diverse backgrounds brings an exciting wealth of information, as well as role models for our students.”

Part of the funding for WISEST will be used to hire at least 11 new female tenure-track faculty members and cover part of the salaries of women in postdoctoral training at UIC who are unsure whether to pursue careers in academia or private industry.

The fellowships will provide networking and workshop opportunities to encourage the young professional women to enter academic careers.

[Claudia Morrissey](#), director of WISEST and deputy director of the [Center for Research on Women and Gender](#), said the postdoctoral training program will offer a highly mentored experience to help ensure these women will be successful academics.

“Diversity enriches the academic environment, and having strong leaders of diverse backgrounds brings an exciting wealth of information, as well as role models for our students,” Rao said.

WISEST is the result of close collaboration among UIC departments and the campus administration with the work of five principal investigators: [Prith Banerjee](#), dean of the College of Engineering, [Christopher Comer](#), dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Mo-Yin Tam, professor of economics and associate vice chancellor for academic affairs, Rao and Morrissey.

“WISEST is an ongoing initiative that truly is setting the stage for broader change across campus,” Morrissey said.

Rao said successful implementation of the WISEST project should serve as a model for other institutions, but the immediate beneficiary will be the UIC academic community.

“It will not only affect science and engineering, but faculty institution-wide,” she said. “I view this as the major benefit of WISEST.”

— *Sherri McGinnis-González contributed to this story.*