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WHERE NO HUMAN HAS GONE BEFORE: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN INCREASING PARTICIPATION BY WOMEN IN SPACE-RELATED CAREERS AND ACTIVITIES.

Abstract

Although the number of women obtaining post-secondary education, including advanced degrees, has grown significantly in recent decades, women's participation in scientific careers is still limited, with their ability to secure leadership roles in scientific fields even lower. This trend is also true of space, where the number of women professionals is markedly less when compared to that of men working in space-related activities. The authors contend that universities, with their large populations of female students and coupled with their function of preparing students to work in various disciplines, are institutions uniquely suited to assist women in pursuing careers in space, including attainment of the highest level decision-making positions. Moreover, the field of space and all of its components provides a particularly useful model for studying gender inequality and the role of universities in altering this imbalance. First, space is unusually multidisciplinary, and provides a range of careers such as science, politics, law, and engineering, to name a few, across which greater women's participation can be measured and evaluated. Second, universities are increasingly becoming more active players in space-related activities by engaging in the construction and launching of small satellites which, in turn, offers new opportunities for greater numbers of women to participate in the space workforce. In order for this to transpire, however, universities need to more closely monitor the numbers of women participating in space-related disciplines, and must also cultivate perspectives and knowledge from traditionally underrepresented populations, including women, which could lead to more and greater achievements in space. In so doing, there will doubtless be unintended and beneficial consequences as well, including the introduction of new scientific, practical, and philosophical perspectives and problem-solving approaches in fields previously dominated almost exclusively by men. Increased participation by women in space activities will also have the effect of broadening the meaning and scope of Article 1 of the Outer Space Treaty whereby space truly is the province of all humankind. This paper proposes a framework whereby universities, space research centers, and other similar organizations are able to more effectively evaluate their role and responsibility of encouraging greater participation by women in the space workforce by working to eliminate traditional barriers that have previously prevented women from working and studying in space-related activities, in turn promoting greater equality both here on Earth and beyond.