

**RESEARCH**

# NIH Leader Shuns All-Male Panels. Most, but Not All, Applaud the Gesture.

*By Alexander C. Kafka* |



In late March, Francis S. Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, was on a plane returning to Bethesda from a visit to the University of Washington. On the West Coast, he heard an earful, not for the first time, about sexual harassment and





ever before. However, as women increasingly enter these fields they face biases and barriers and it is not surprising that sexual harassment is one of these barriers."

Collins said on Thursday that he's "getting a wonderful outpouring of emails today" from people supportive of the move.

And many, but not all, voiced their approval to *The Chronicle* as well.

"It's about time," said Margaret W. Rossi ter, a professor emerita of the history of science at Cornell U niversity. Rossi ter wrote a three-volume history of women and science, a project that she said "was considered esoteric and almost laughable" when she began it in the 1970s.

"Professors were so hostile."

Of Collins's statement, she said, "It's good when people in high places take stands like this. It sends a message." Of the culture, she said, "something has changed."

Marta L. Wayne is a professor of biology and department chair at the U niversity of Florida, and president-elect of the Society for Molecular Biology and Evolution. The society continually works toward "equity for women at our conference and on our panels," she said. "Every statement of a person of influence like this helps." The international context for the society "and for science in general," she said, "means that gestures by internationally recognized leaders like Dr. Collins are even more important."

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between micromanaging the local organizing committees and providing guidance," she said, but members are coming to understand that diversity is a fundamental responsibility of participants, "not an add-on." The society, she said, also offers "care awards" to help scholars pay for child and elder care so that they can afford to appear on panels.

Angeline G. Pendergrass, a project scientist for the National Center for Atmospheric Research who wrote a recent report on making scientific meetings more inclusive, called Collins's statement "a really promising sign, a great example of something a man can do to show support for his colleagues." She sees the move as part of "a shift in the conversation."

But not everyone is as enthusiastic.

"I am dismayed by Dr. Collins's announcement," wrote Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars, in a statement to *The Chronicle*. "It is both in substance and spirit antiscience. The NIH should be focused on the quality of the science it supports, not the chromosomes of panel members at science conferences. The National Academy of Sciences raised an important social and moral issue in its report on sexual harassment of women in academic science, engineering, and medicine, but Dr. Collins's response is merely a theatrical gesture — and a badly misjudged one as well."

Others, like Usha Haley, a professor of management and director of the Center for International Business Advancement at Wichita State

Rochelle Diamond, chair of the National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals, sees Collins's statement "as an important beginning to the dialogue." More-diverse panels mean more opportunity for professional development and more visibility for more types of people, said Diamond, who has been on the professional staff at Caltech for 37 years. In an era of backlash and backsliding against alternative sexual identities and orientations, she said, "we must change the climate of fear." Toward that end, Diamond hopes "the entire scientific establishment" will follow Collins's lead.

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