

4. A Positive Note

Although the experiences described in this report have affected all the women in Computer Science, some women have found supportive research groups in which to work. They were respected as members of a group. Other members of the group consulted women for their technical opinions, cared about their work, and treated them as equals. These women worked closely and successfully with their supervisors. Since their supervisors demonstrated respect for them by encouraging them to take on significant responsibilities within the group, other colleagues were apt to show them respect as well.

The following comments provide a glimpse of the supportive atmosphere that could surround every research group, but unfortunately surrounds only a small percentage of them. These kinds of experiences should be part of every graduate student's training.

- At technical seminars, when questions arise in my area, my supervisor always refers the questions to me, even though he is certainly capable of answering them himself.
- When visiting scientists come to see my supervisor, and are interested in work in my area, he always includes me in the discussions.
- I have had several discussions with my advisor, in which he spent considerable time with me, discussing possible paths that I might follow. He discussed how I could best prepare myself for each option. These talks made me feel that my advisor respected my goals and was concerned about ensuring that I would be prepared to meet them.
- One semester, I was put in charge of organizing a weekly informal seminar dealing with my research area. My responsibility was to select a paper weekly and lead the discussion. This experience was valuable to me in many ways; not only for the professional skills I acquired, but also for the confidence I gained. In particular, the interest and commitment of the other participants was especially gratifying.
- A professor invited me to present a guest lecture on the work of my group in his undergraduate course. The respect from this professor that this gesture demonstrated and the subsequent respect that I received from his students meant a great deal to me and helped to build my self-confidence.
- If my supervisor is unable to attend a conference in which he was asked to speak about our work, he always suggests that I take his place.
- When I first started, some senior graduate students and research staff had just begun implementing a large project in my area of interest. They invited me to participate in this project, and we found some small problems I could work on. The project was a valuable experience for me since I had had no research experience in that area. I received an excellent introduction to my area of interest by being able to participate in and contribute to an ongoing effort. It was especially important to me that the students and staff took the initiative to include me and help me get started.

Barriers to Equality

- I once took a course in an area that was somewhat removed from my area of research, but which I found very interesting. I took an active part in the class, regularly asking and answering questions. Toward the end of the semester, the professor encouraged me on a couple of occasions (before the entire class) to attend the regular seminars of his group, if I was more interested in their research. This type of encouragement can really go a long way in developing a woman's self-image.
- Whenever my supervisor finishes a new paper, he gives it to me to read, not because he needs a proofreader, but because he is genuinely interested in my technical opinion of the work.
- When I started as a graduate student, I had no background in the particular area that I chose to pursue in my research. My supervisor was not concerned about this. It was apparent to him that I had a good general technical background and that I showed enthusiasm for the subject. He gave me a small project right away, encouraged me to read the literature, and was confident that things would work out. They did.

With the same positive stimulation, encouragement, and respect that men receive, women are as successful as men in pursuing professional careers in computer science. Senior women in research groups may also serve as role models for new women, which often leads to the perpetuation of women in the group and the continuation of a supportive environment for women. MIT and other academic institutions have the potential and the responsibility to provide equitable training for female computer scientists by promoting the kind of positive, educational experiences reflected in the above comments.