The State of Women in Engineering

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Extant perspectives on the numbers of women in engineering point to the same two factors that plague the declining numbers of graduates in this discipline overall (male and female); namely recruitment and retention. Research performed by Dr. Ohland’s group, which managed a database called the Multiple-Institution Database for Investigating Engineering Development”, which followed students over a 17-year period ending in 2005 revealed that retention appears to be a smaller issue compared to recruitment, especially in the context of women.

A number of studies exist that have explored the specifics of recruitment and retention related issues pertaining to women in engineering. The authors own personal experiences in academe and industry highlight the dearth of women in the programs and profession overall. However, our intent in this presentation is to go back to the basics. Through a collection and compilation of personal narratives focusing on the reasons that got a female student into an engineering program in the first place, we hope to find clues that will allow us to create an effective framework to recruit more women into our program, in the future.

Additionally, Norwich is an atypical undergraduate institution of learning, being one of six private military colleges in the United States. Therefore, the student body that Norwich attracts may be different from mainstream college campuses, as may be the narratives of the women who apply to our program.

In this presentation, we will explore the current state of women in engineering, discuss the findings of our investigation on the reasons our female students selected an engineering major and the factors that make them stay. Further, we will highlight some of the factors that we found motivated women to become engineers on our campus, and invite audience experiences (both their own as well as those of their student bodies) to compare and contrast our findings at Norwich.

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