Introduction

CUWPY is an annual three day conference for undergraduate women in physics. The first conference took place on January 18-20, 2008. This year the conference will be held on January 16-18, 2009 with simultaneous sister conferences at the University of Southern California (USC) and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Illinois). The conference has two overarching goals. One goal is to give young women the confidence, motivation, and resources to apply to graduate school and successfully complete a Ph.D. The other goal is to make undergraduate women aware of physics career opportunities. The idea for the conference originated with two USC graduate students and originally targeted the state of California.

Statement of Need

The low representation of women in physics is an issue of international concern and has been highlighted by events such as the recent 2nd IUPAP International Conference on Women in Physics. This disparity points to an untapped resource of talented women who could contribute to the scientific community and future developments in science. The percentage of degrees awarded to women in physics in the USA is much lower than in some other countries. In the American Institute of Physics report, Women in Physics and Astronomy, 2005, the US ranked 12 out of 19 countries for percentage of PhDs awarded to women and 11th out of 20 countries for percentage of Bachelors in Physics awarded to women. The representation of women in physics drops as one goes higher up the academic ladder. One of the key transitions is from undergraduate school to graduate school. Nationally 22% of Physics Bachelors degrees are awarded to women. In contrast only 18% of Physics PhDs were awarded to women. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that only 13% of the US citizens receiving PhDs were women.

Objectives

The overall goals of the conference are:
- To foster an undergraduate culture in which women are encouraged and supported to pursue and succeed in higher education in physics.
- To give young women the confidence, motivation, and resources to apply to graduate school and successfully complete a Ph.D.
- To strengthen the network of women in physics nationally.

To meet these goals, the specific objectives for the conference are that the participants leave with:
- Increased awareness of current research and career options in physics.
- Greater familiarity with the graduate school experience.
- Resources for applying to and being successful in graduate school, as well as general resources for women in physics.
- A network of women in physics.
- Knowledge of career opportunities for women with a BS in physics.

Program

The conference takes place over a weekend and features research talks by distinguished faculty, aimed at exposing undergraduate women to a broad range of current “hot topics” in physics research. There are also presentations on career options, graduate school applications, and issues faced by women in science. Additional sessions include lab tours, undergraduate research presentations, and small group discussion on graduate school life and ways to succeed as women in physics. All meals are provided and lodging costs are covered, allowing the student participant to interact with one another and with the speakers.

Conference Survey Results

Students were given a survey before and after the conference in 2008. Figure 3 demonstrates that women are more likely to apply to graduate school in physics or another science and to seek a career in physics or another science after attending the CUWPy. Figure 4 demonstrates that CUWPy is useful for network building; after attending the conference, women knew more physics majors, more female physics majors, and more professional physicists.

Conclusions

The 2008 CUWPy was a huge success. Undergraduate women had a chance to present their research, meet other female undergraduates, meet female graduate students, tour research labs, learn about graduate school, and meet successful professional physicists. Attendees also learnt about the obstacles that women could prepare themselves to overcome them. The conference also generated a list of suggestions for ways in which physics departments could improve the environment for women to increase recruitment and retention of women. The 2009 conference will build on these successes and provide an opportunity for more women to benefit from these activities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the organizers of the USC conference, Amy Cassidy and Katie Mussack, for beginning the CUWPy and for their help and support in setting up the conference at Yale. We would also like to thank our sponsors: the US Department of Energy, the National Science Foundation, the New England Section of the American Physical Society, the American Association of Physics Teachers, the Yale Department of Physics, the Yale Department of Engineering, the Yale College Dean's Office, the Yale College Science Council, the Yale-HHMI Biosciences Education Grant, the Yale Office of the President, the Yale Office of the Provost, the Yale Center for Research on Interface Structures and Phenomena, and the Yale Women's Faculty Forum. We are very grateful to the Yale University Physics Department and Dr. Meg Urry, department chair, for extensive financial and logistical support.