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A final recommendation

21.05.2014 | [In person](#)

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Columnist Ursula Keller recommends adopting the American Physical Society's «Best Practices for Female Faculty» as a key component of good governance.



Achieving excellence in all areas in an unquestioned goal for ETH – gender balance in this regard is no less important. (Photo: iStockphoto.com)

In my second column I highlighted the recent ETH Rector election. The elected candidate, professor Springman, is a co-founder and a board member of the ETH WPF. We are happy to congratulate Sarah Springman for her successful nomination.

My previous columns have been based largely on my personal experience as an ETH Professor. For the last column in this series, I would like to broaden the view and examine the operational aspects and overall governance of ETH at the department level. I will address the following question: What can the departments and ETH as an institution do to support excellence and the progression of gender balance?

Excellence in research, education and knowledge and technology transfer is an unquestioned goal of ETH, and rightly so. It is this focus on excellence that allows ETH to recruit outstanding faculty to educate future leaders for academia, industry and government, and to contribute to innovation in Swiss industry. Gender balance is no less important. It will take all our talented students, researchers and innovators to meet the

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complex challenges facing our globalized society.

ETH promotes a culture of responsibility and autonomy. Substantial resources are given directly to the faculty who are responsible for managing their research groups, fulfilling their teaching obligations and participating in governance at the level of their institute, department and ETH. The departments have considerable autonomy, particularly with regard to their internal organization and the management of their resources. Despite this, the small proportion of female faculty and even smaller proportion of women in positions of academic leadership raise the reasonable question as to whether ETH and its departments are taking advantage of all the talent that could be tapped.

The American Physical Society (APS) has compiled an excellent resource that provides a list of «[Best Practices for Female Faculty \(PDF, 69 KB\)](#)». This document lists 13 strategies to improve a university's working environment for both male and female faculty. Transparency and shared governance are two key principles underlying these strategies. APS recommendation number 8 states: «Strive for transparency in departmental governance by developing clear and written procedures ... and by rotating faculty into leadership positions. Female faculty will do best in a well run department where all faculty are given opportunities to contribute to the department.»

«Transparency in departmental governance» is particularly important at ETH due to the significant resources distributed within the departments to individual professors. These resources are one of the biggest assets that ETH can provide for its faculty. Each professor can multiply the base funding from ETH through external funding acquired on a competitive basis. This combination of internal and external funding enables us, as ETH professors, to address some of the great challenges in our fields, to be trendsetters, and to become world-leading experts. Ideally, the internal resources at ETH should be distributed in a way that provides the best outcome for both science and society and reflects the research performance of individual professors in an international context as well as the services that they provide to ETH and Switzerland. It would certainly not be an easy task to define criteria for the distribution of internal resources, but a transparent discussion and evaluation of resource allocation would be an important starting point. On the basis of my own experience, I would urge the departments at ETH to share information regarding their practices so that resource allocation can be better used to support the goals of ETH.

A second piece of advice from the APS recommendation is the rotation of faculty into leadership positions. Shared governance contributes to organizational success by promoting faculty engagement and creating a broader base of leadership within the institution, as discussed in the organizational management literature by [Pfeffer and Veiga \(PDF, 3.1 MB\)](#), 1999. This is particularly important in the case of female faculty since their (minority) perspective can easily be lost if no proactive measures for inclusion are taken. Direct and broad faculty engagement will also help to promote transparency and stem the growth tendency of administrative structures.

I make these recommendations in the interest of strengthening ETH and promoting its success. Success at ETH opens the doors for Switzerland to the rest of the world. As a student, I personally benefited from this,

receiving funding from the U.S. to obtain my Ph.D. at Stanford University. Ultimately, I was able to return to ETH as a tenured professor.

I am deeply grateful to ETH for providing the environment for my success, both as a student and as a professor. Nonetheless, my experience has also illuminated ways in which the ETH system has neglected to make the most of the talent that is available to it. The APS «Best Practices for Female Faculty» would have made a big difference to me as a young faculty member, and I urge the ETH to adopt them as a key component of good governance.



About the Author

Ursula Keller was born 1959 in Zug. She has been a physics professor at ETH since 1993, and director of the NCCR MUST since 2010. She obtained her Masters at ETH Zurich in 1984, and her Ph.D. at

Stanford University in 1989, and before returning to ETH she worked as an independent researcher at AT&T Bell Laboratories. Her current research group explores ultrafast science and laser technology, using this competitive know-how to understand and control fundamental charge and energy transport with atomic spatial and attosecond temporal resolution. Ursula has received several international prizes, as well as a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant. She currently serves as the president of the ETH Women Professors Forum ([ETH WPF](#)).

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21.05.2014

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