PHYSICS & ASTRONOMY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO: a case study in building a gender-balanced department

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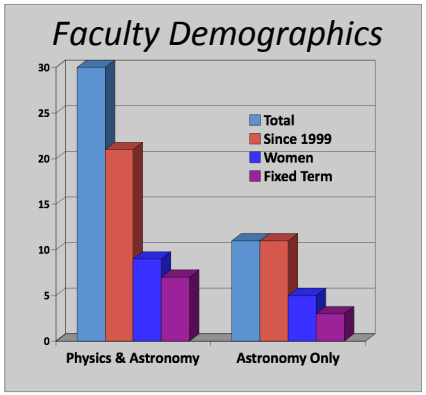
The University of Western Ontario (UWO) is among the research universities in North America with the largest fraction (9 out of 30 or 30%) of women faculty in a Department of Physics and Astronomy. For the astronomers, the numbers are even higher at 45% (5/11). This recent development is largely the result of high turnover from retirements, targets of opportunity, and the University policy of partner hires. Generous family leave policies (available to both men and women) and the location make UWO appealing for junior faculty with school-age children. Maintaining this gender balance will depend on establishing long-term strategies for transitioning current fixed-term faculty to permanent positions.



Graduate students in front of the P&A Building.

Sculpture on the P&A Building.

Hiring

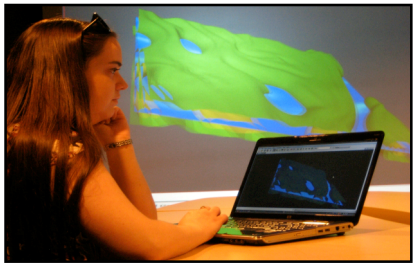
Three of the women in the department were hired in conjunction with two federal programs designed to promote outstanding talent. After a fixed term, the University commits to fully funding faculty initially supported in part by the Canadian government. These types of positions allow time (with a reduced teaching load) and resources (with some guaranteed research funds) to enable faculty to enhance their impact in their fields.

The astronomy group has grown by two as a result of partner hires. According to department practice, partners (including unmarried and same-sex couples) are typically hired into 50%/40%/10% teaching/research/service positions (compared with 40%/40%/20% for standard tenure-track faculty) with a 5-year, renewable, fixed term. Fixed-term hires can supervise graduate students and apply for grants, and it is not apparent from department webpages or job titles which of the junior faculty have fixed-term appointments.

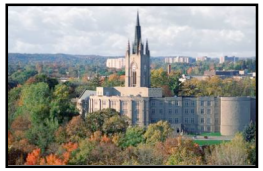
London, Ontario is the 15th largest Canadian city.

External Factors

With support from the province of Ontario, maternity and paternity leave are covered at 95% of salary for up to a year combined for both parents; both men and women take advantage of this policy. High-quality daycare is available on campus for university affiliates, and subsidies are available for students. The province of Ontario has made support for early childhood a priority; this includes public preschool starting at age 4, and Early Years Centres which host free breast-feeding clinics and parenting classes. Combined with an affordable housing market and a healthy school system, the city of London — located approximately midway between Toronto and Detroit — is appealing for individuals with school-age children.



Of 27 astronomy graduate students, 56% are women.



The UWO campus in the fall.

Maintaining the Balance

Of the current core faculty, 7 are in fixed-term positions with 3 or 5-year contracts. These members make up 33% and 50% of the department's female and visible minority cohorts, respectively. At present, while there is a desire at the department level to convert at least some of these positions to permanent status, there is no clear path forward at the Faculty of Science level, particularly in the current economic climate. Ensuring the hard-earned gender balance is maintained in Physics and Astronomy will require continued attention to the issue.

Cronyn Observatory on campus.

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