

# THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

## RESEARCH

# NIH Leader Shuns All-Male Panels. Most, but Not All, Applaud the Gesture.

*By Alexander C. Kafka* | JUNE 13, 2019

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In late March, Francis S. Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, was on a plane returning to Bethesda from a visit to the University of Washington. On the West Coast, he heard an earful, not for the first time, about sexual harassment and an unwelcoming atmosphere toward women in science.



Chronicle photo by Julia Schmalz

Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health

Collins has focused on diversity at the NIH for years — for instance, appointing the Stanford cardiologist Hannah Valentine, in 2014, as the institutes' first Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity. He'd

heard concerns about "manels," all-male panels at scientific conferences — often not only all male but all white — and he had been on them. The "disproportionate overrepresentation of white men," he said in a phone interview on Thursday, is "really not the way we should be handling these kinds of gatherings for the betterment of science."

"I was thinking, What else can we do? I could simply say I'm not going to" participate.

So this week Collins announced that "starting now, when I consider speaking invitations, I will expect a level playing field, where scientists of all backgrounds are evaluated fairly for speaking opportunities. If that attention to inclusiveness is not evident in the agenda, I will decline to take part. I challenge other scientific leaders across the biomedical enterprise to do the same."

In the statement, Collins cites an influential 2018 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine called "Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine."

"In recent years," a description of the report reads, "the diversity of those participating in these fields, particularly the participation of women, has improved and there are significantly more women entering careers and studying science, engineering, and medicine than

ever before. However, as women increasingly enter these fields they face biases and barriers and it is not surprising that sexual harassment is one of these barriers."

Collins said on Thursday that he's "getting a wonderful outpouring of emails today" from people supportive of the move.

And many, but not all, voiced their approval to *The Chronicle* as well.

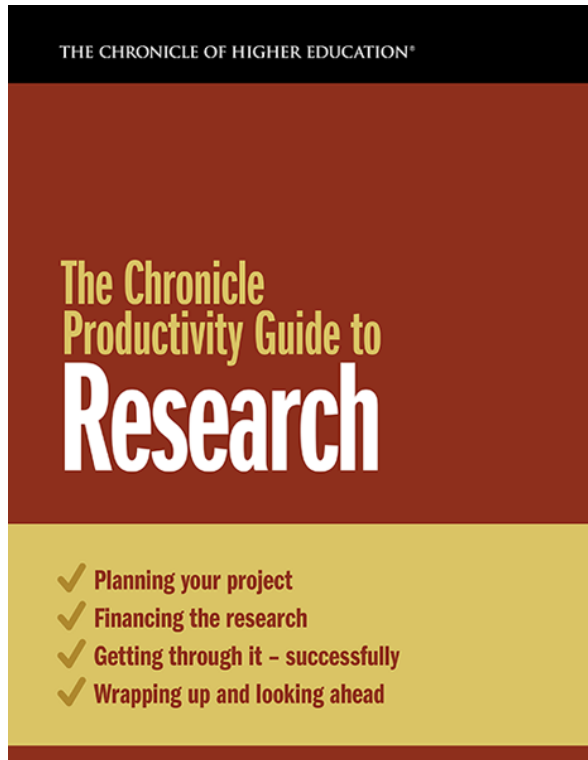
"It's about time," said Margaret W. Rossiter, a professor emerita of the history of science at Cornell University. Rossiter wrote a three-volume history of women and science, a project that she said "was considered esoteric and almost laughable" when she began it in the 1970s.

"Professors were so hostile."

Of Collins's statement, she said, "It's good when people in high places take stands like this. It sends a message." Of the culture, she said, "something has changed."

Marta L. Wayne is a professor of biology and department chair at the University of Florida, and president-elect of the Society for Molecular Biology and Evolution. The society continually works toward "equity for women at our conference and on our panels," she said. "Every statement of a person of influence like this helps." The international context for the society "and for science in general," she said, "means that gestures by internationally recognized leaders like Dr. Collins are even more important."

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The society makes clear to those submitting panel programs that they will be considered, in part, with diversity in mind. If some look promising but insufficiently diverse, she said, the proposals are sent back with recommendations along those lines. "There is a fine line

between micromanaging the local organizing committees and providing guidance," she said, but members are coming to understand that diversity is a fundamental responsibility of participants, "not an add-on." The society, she said, also offers "care awards" to help scholars pay for child and elder care so that they can afford to appear on panels.

Angeline G. Pendergrass, a project scientist for the National Center for Atmospheric Research who wrote a recent report on making scientific meetings more inclusive, called Collins's statement "a really promising sign, a great example of something a man can do to show support for his colleagues." She sees the move as part of "a shift in the conversation."

But not everyone is as enthusiastic.

"I am dismayed by Dr. Collins's announcement," wrote Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars, in a statement to *The Chronicle*. "It is both in substance and spirit antiscience. The NIH should be focused on the quality of the science it supports, not the chromosomes of panel members at science conferences. The National Academy of Sciences raised an important social and moral issue in its report on sexual harassment of women in academic science, engineering, and medicine, but Dr. Collins's response is merely a theatrical gesture — and a badly misjudged one as well."

Others, like Usha Haley, a professor of management and director of the Center for International Business Advancement at Wichita State University, applaud Collins's statement but say the more fundamental need is for equal pay and more women at top administrative levels of academe. Lee Pelton, president of Emerson College, said he appreciates Collins's gesture and that he practices the same policy himself. But, he said, "This is symptomatic of a larger problem in higher ed and that is that we have not reached gender parity in our institutions, which privilege credentials over talent. There is a gender power gap."

In some fields, like geophysics, eliminating some all-male panels can be particularly difficult, but Collins "shines a bright spotlight on the issue," said John Koehr, executive director of the Society of Exploration Geophysicists, and that's "a positive." The profession is less than 20-percent women, he said, but that number is inching up, and gender equity has been a priority.

"The reality," he said, "is the pool of subject-matter experts in geophysics is lopsided. So sometimes, despite your efforts to encourage that, it's very difficult always to have a gender-diverse panel. But it's not for lack of trying." At a meeting next week in Austin sponsored by geology, geophysics, and engineering societies, including his, he said, there will be several prominent female speakers.

Rochelle Diamond, chair of the National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals, sees Collins's statement "as an important beginning to the dialogue." More-diverse panels mean more opportunity for professional development and more visibility for more types of people, said Diamond, who has been on the professional staff at Caltech for 37 years. In an era of backlash and backsliding against alternative sexual identities and orientations, she said, "we must change the climate of fear." Toward that end, Diamond hopes "the entire scientific establishment" will follow Collins's lead.

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