

Students and faculty from the UMass Physics Department convened for a radio discussion on “*Women and minorities in Physics*” on Tuesday October 21, Undercurrents Radio, WMUA 91.1 FM. Using a round table discussion format, DJ Jennie (that’s Jennie Traschen, Physics professor) interviewed colleagues Lori Goldner and Courtney Lannert, with undergraduates Kirsten Randle, Bela Nelson, Alissa Roegge, and Javier King. The group spoke about the fact that while things have changed in the past 30 years, the numbers have not changed that much—a glance at a physics class or a faculty roster shows that women and minorities are still a small fraction of the physics community.

The discussion started with the guests describing how each ended up in physics. Like physics geeks everywhere, people spoke about being drawn to understand nature, the love of being precise, and how it was “just something I’ve always wanted to do.” Several students mentioned the importance of strong women science and math role models, including parents and teachers. Others talked about how they continued their studies in spite of so-called “anti-models.”

The broadcast continued with questions: Is the playing field level? Does subtle—or overt—bias affect students, and does such bias continue to affect the careers of women and minority scientists? One student offered the interesting analysis that struggles against prejudice have two phases: First it has to be legal to vote, go to college, study, and enter professional careers. Then there’s the rest to accomplish, that is, elevating the law into equality of practice. Participants spoke in detail about the “invisible person effect.” This refers to the experience of being in a study group, a lab discussion group, etc., and suggesting a solution or offering an insight about a problem that is ignored. Then, when a male makes the same observation a few minutes later, it is suddenly heard and given appropriate credit. The panel also talked about the shared problem of being dismissed intellectually.

The atmosphere in the studio was upbeat, matching the music, with a lot of laughing. Two phone calls came in, both from men. One was an inquiry about what can be done to increase the number of women applicants for technical jobs. The other pointed to the significance of the group just being on the air and discussing these issues.

A recording of the interview can be heard at <http://www.mixcloud.com/UMPbot/women-and-minorities-in-physics-undercurrents-with-jennie-traschen/>