**AdvanceRIT Podcast Series**

**Faculty Spotlight: Trailblazing Women at RIT**

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**Season 1**

**Inaugural message by the President, Dr. Munson**

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Good afternoon, Doctor Manson. Thank you for taking the time. I know how busy you are this week. Thank you for taking time to talk to us and inaugurate the podcast series.

**Dr. David Munson:** Yes, I'm happy to be here. Mahler. During. Well, it's all the students are arriving and we'll have a new student convocation tomorrow, so things are really ramping up.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Good. Wonderful. So let's begin with the importance of focusing on women faculty.

**Dr. David Munson:** Sure.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** So how important is focusing on women faculty at RIT to you?

**Dr. David Munson:** I think it's extremely important, and there are a lot of reasons for that. One is that RIT is a fairly heavily stem focused university, and women tend to be underrepresented on those faculties. As we work to recruit more and more students in a diverse way and have more women among our student body, we need examples in the classroom and in research and in scholarship. And so we're working very hard at that. I also feel that kind of more at the macro scale that at the national level, think about us economic competitiveness. We need our best people in positions where they can do their best. And to have artificial limitations. Where a young woman feels that maybe a particular discipline isn't for her, just because she doesn't see much representation, that's a really bad thing. And then I'll add a third thing. And this really comes from my own background as a young faculty member myself. I was very involved in the IEEE, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, served on a lot of different committees, and was in the leadership and in multiple different technical societies. And in those earliest days, women were almost not present at all. And here I'm talking about women faculty and the leadership. But in those very earliest days, that was true. But a few years after that, there were some notable women that really rose through the ranks in the IEEE, which of course is a volunteer organization. And as I was attending all kinds of different technical committee meetings and administrative committee meetings and what have you, I always found that we had a richer conversation, we made better decisions, we had more vision present amongst the group when women were part of the group. And I'm not making this up, it's not as if, okay, Mahler's coming to talk to me, and I need to say something that sounds profound. No, I discovered this as a young faculty member, and it really made an impact on me.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Wonderful. Talking about vision, what is your vision for women faculty at RIT as the president of the institution?

**Dr. David Munson:** Well, I guess I think a lot of people would agree with this, that on average, our women faculty ought to be paid the same in the different disciplines. They ought to receive the same amount of recognition for their work, whether it's teaching or scholarship. They ought to be at least equally represented among the leadership of the institution. And, you know, here we're looking at department chairs and deans and vice presidents and that sort of thing. I think it's all about equality. And then in addition, there's some aspect of this that really is about inclusivity and for everybody feeling like they belong and this is the place where they can do their best work.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Wonderful. So where do you think we are as an institution in terms of gender equity today, and what are the positives and the challenges?

**Dr. David Munson:** Yeah, I think we're pretty far along, and I don't take much credit for that at all. There were a lot of things that were initiated before I ever arrived, and so I think the institution had made a lot of progress before I arrived. And so we have some very notable women faculty, I'm not going to call them out by name, who are viewed within the RIT community as being big successes and doing important things. Be a little more specific on that later. So that's there. I think they're probably. We still have a little bit of bias in student evaluations and teaching, at least in some disciplines. I think that salaries are pretty much on par between men and women. I know that those studies are conducted on a regular basis, and the last time I saw data, things looked pretty good. But again, I'm not taking credit for that. The advanced program that you had up did so much work on this and many other areas that it really put us in good stead. I still very much worry about the situations where in some disciplines, women faculty and women students are so underrepresented that their male counterparts don't even recognize what those women would be capable of if they were there. And I worry about cases where maybe it's a computer science course and there's a women student in the class and she's the only one that's really not okay. I think that's not fair to that young lady in the classroom, and I think that we'll provide a better education at RIT, if in every discipline we have significant gender diversity.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Wonderful. So how do you think RIT as an institution has supported women faculty thus far, and are there any prioRITies, initiatives that you are excited about going, looking forward?

**Dr. David Munson:** Well, so the thing that we're working on there, and you're familiar with this to some extent, is when I arrived, there was already an existence a president's commission on women, and that organization has really undergone a lot of change in leadership and programming. And of course, over Covid, there were a lot of things that temporarily died on campus and so really have to be reestablished. And we're in a situation now where we are reestablishing that programming. And when I say we, most of the credit goes to the co chairs of the PCW, the most recent co chairs, and this is a volunteer job where Darcy Lane and Betsy Dell, as most people know, Darcy, is stepping back from that duty. And now we're considering a different form for the PCW, where we would actually have full time staffing and not have to find volunteers and sort of take it out of their hide, so to speak, in order to devote time to this. And so I think there are some big changes that are afoot. We don't yet have a timetable there, but I will say that I've enjoyed the programming the PCW has put together in recent years, especially around the week where we're celebrating women on campus, bringing in outside speakers and that sort of thing. And also, you'll recall that we established this day of understanding on campus. It occurs on a Friday in the fall, and the initial programming for the first one of those really surrounded topics involving race, but the second one involved gender. And I found that second one, which was just last fall, to have a whole lot of different meaningful sessions. And kudos to all the folks who were presenters and others who attended and contributed to the conversation. So those are just a few things.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Wonderful. So if there are any specific accomplishments of women faculty that you are proud of or you're happy to talk about as the leader of the.

**Dr. David Munson:** Yeah, here, I'll get in trouble if I mention specific names, but I'll mention some things that have been done and those in the know, you'll know who I'm talking about. I think there's been a very notable effort over the last number of years in the College of science, and there is a set of faculty there that have done some pretty remarkable work in elevating the status of women, including women students, in that college. And without going further, I'd just say that I think the institution is very proud of those women faculty members. And then we have certain research areas on campus. And I'll just pick one, astrophysics. When we've got some women faculty who are involved in fundamental discoveries involving collisions of black holes, mathematical modeling of that, and confirming the existence of gravity waves, etcetera, that is really revolutionary work. We have some male faculty involved as well, but a lot of the press or press clippings are being generated by women faculty in that area. And then I'll mention another area where we really want to grow. At RIT, this is probably at the top of our list for growth, and that is in the health sciences. RIT has a very small program in the health sciences. We're proud of our PA program or proud of our ultrasound program, and then there are some others. But the nation now is at a point where about 20% of our GDP is in healthcare, spent in healthcare. And at RIT, we're not even close to 20% of the institution. It's a few percent of the institution. And so we're hard at work now, laying the groundwork to establish additional degree programs. And I think we're going to see a lot of women faculty involved there and a lot of leadership of women. And I will say that our effort so far is heavily involving our partnership with Rochester Regional health, and pretty much everybody we're working with on the RRH side and helping us develop these programs is a woman. And so I'm looking forward to rounding out those programs, and frankly, as a byproduct, using them to attract many more women students to our campus, as well as women faculty.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Great. So also, talking about the performance arts program.

**Dr. David Munson:** Yes. Well, yeah, I generally don't leave that out because I'm pretty keen on what we've done there. So people are familiar with the fact that historically, RIT has been strong in STEM disciplines, has been strong in the studio arts, but we have initiated, we started about five years ago a program in the performing arts. This is not for students who major in the performing arts, but rather they major. It could be business or science or engineering or computing, what have you, but they have very high level experiences. And as of this fall, we now have about 2000 students in the performing arts scholars program. And whereas about 35% of our student body consists of students who identify as women in the performing arts, it's 45%. And so a big jump there. And most recently, we have initiated a program in the studio arts, but for non majors, that's called Art X. We had quite a number of students in the pilot class last year, and then this year also have a fairly large number of students coming in in the entering class. And no surprise, many, many women that are interested in adding that kind of experience to their degree program. And so we are working at developing experiences, if you will, educational experiences that will help attract women. Another thing, we just have started this incoming fall, and I don't yet know the size of the program, but it is a program for sustainability scholars, and I'm betting there are going to be a whole lot of women signing up for that. I know that we only had room for about 60 or maybe 75 students, but I was told there were hundreds of students that were interested. And so that's a program we'll be growing in the future. And of course, once any of these programs, once they get solidified and we're going to be doing them year after year, then we can use them as advertising collateral and go out and try to attract students that want those programs.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Interesting, a lot of new initiatives and new efforts to bring more faculty and students to campus. What would you like the office of advance and perhaps this podcast to accomplish? What is your vision for them?

**Dr. David Munson:** Well, I think that, and you can contribute as much to the answer as I can, I think Mahler and let me go back just a little ways. Prior to my tenure here at RITa, I was the dean of engineering at the University of Michigan, and I was pretty involved in the advanced program at Michigan from its early days. Now, I was not the leader of the program. I don't want to pretend that at all, but I was very involved, as was the dean of liberal arts, which had the natural sciences in the arts college, the dean of medicine and a number of others. And so I was able to see what that program achieved. And by the time I arrived at RIT, we had done a lot of the same things here. And so it becomes a little bit of a tricky question because a whole lot of work has been done. But at Michigan and at RIT, after the NSF grant expired, we had found enough value in the program that we said, we have to keep this going. And so what are some of the elements in keeping that going? For me, one of the very most important elements is I'll use the term training, but educating faculty who serve on faculty search committees about bias. And I still remember back at my previous institution having some department chairs and others kind of question how valuable this kind of training or education might be. And what happened was when I was an engineering dean, I instituted a requirement that no faculty member could serve on a search committee unless they had gone to this workshop within the past three years. And those folks who kind of wanted to complain on the front end after they went to the workshop, and these workshops were all 100% research based, nobody was making up stuff. They were quoting facts and figures from real studies, and people just came back from those workshops amazed. And so that's the kind of thing where at RIT, that wouldn't be a new initiative, but it's really important that we keep that going, and it's really important that we have people working on issues related to women faculty across the entire institution. It's too much for us to expect that somehow every college will be able to take this on on their own at a high level. And we've got some larger colleges, maybe they could. We've got some smaller colleges where it would probably be more difficult. And so I love having a set of people more central to the institution that are thinking about this. I think there's also, in addition to. I just mentioned one example, which is this education about bias and evaluating resumes, how we conduct interviews, and that sort of thing. What I hope is that maybe the advanced program and perhaps this revised or altered form of the president's commission on Women can work on creating an environment both programmatically and what it looks like and feels like to be at RIT, that will help us attract more women students. We badly need more women students. 35% isn't enough. And when I arrived at RIT on day one, I declared, we have to have at least 40% women. Of course, I'd like 50%, but at least if we had 40%, then it will start to look and feel pretty. Even 35% is not enough. And what I discovered, this was just a couple of years ago, I discovered a memo that Bill Dessler had wRITten during his time as president, probably earlier his presidency. He'd also named 40%. Then after that, I discovered a memo that Al Simone had wRITten decades ago, and his number was 40%. And darned, we're chipping away at it so slowly. It was 32 or 33, and fine. Now we're at 35. But this is like watching paint dry or watching corn grow. It takes forever. And that's where I think we've really got to think about what this place looks like and feels like to be a student and make the case that for a prospective women student, that this is the best place for them, and we really have to mean it, and it has to be true. And then we also have to add some new degree programs. But to the extent that the advanced program could help, think about on the faculty side, what this place looks like and feels like to women students and what else we as a faculty can do for those women students, that would be fantastic.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Great. That's really interesting. Yeah. We're also looking at, you know, creating a sense of belonging among faculty, women faculty. Our Connex grant focus was building a sense of belonging. So we gave out grants to faculty across different disciplines to create connections, you know, whether it's formal networking events or informal get togethers. So we need to. It's important to get students. We also. It's important to get faculty and also get them to stay being here and thrive here.

**Dr. David Munson:** Yeah. And I would imagine that those grants were not distributed uniformly across all disciplines. In some disciplines, this is really badly needed, and in others, there may be even a majoRITy of women faculty. But still, I'm also a big fan of faculty mixing between the disciplines. And so a program like that, that would maybe, I don't know the numbers in, say, some of the departments in our engineering school or computing school, in terms of numbers of women faculty in each department. But for them to be able to form connections with women faculty in other colleges within the university, that's fantastic.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** And that is also one of the reasons that we wanted to start this podcast, because sometimes faculty can exist in silos. So it's important for us to create visibility and recognize the work that our women faculty do. It's not just about departments. Colleges, you know, other departments in the same college often do not know what women do within their.

**Dr. David Munson:** I think that's true. I think that's true.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Another reason why we wanted to make women faculty feel recognized and acknowledged for the work that they.

**Dr. David Munson:** Well, and I think there's some good news. Again, referring to my previous institution, when I started my term as a dean of engineering, I had only a handful of women in the entire college, and this is a very large college, only a handful of senior women. And when I say senior, they were sort of beginning full professors kind of at that level. And so if you were looking for women who potentially could serve on a committee, head up a committee, maybe be a department chair, and that sort of thing, you can't pick on the same small group forever. And they did more than their fair share. But what happened was by the time I was leaving, departing as dean of engineering, there was a much more robust cohort of women faculty. And when I left now, there were several women faculty who were 100% qualified to become department chairs, associate deans, and that sort of thing. And that happened, and it's still happening. And so the tide can be turned. Part of this is just about having enough numbers. But of course, when those young faculty, those young women faculty launch their careers here, we want them to have a really good experience and to have conditions I keep referring to in which they can do their best work, because that will make them successful as well as the institution. And then all the rest of this becomes possible.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** That's a perfect segue to my last question.

**Dr. David Munson:** Okay.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** As a president, what would you like your legacy to be in terms of faculty gender equity and inclusion at RIT?

**Dr. David Munson:** Gosh. And I'm one who, I don't really think in any conscious way about my legacy at all, but I guess I would like for people to say that I cared. Number one, that I noticed that we have issues and that I did my fair share. The president can't wave a wand and change everything. The president can help create an environment, can help create conversation, can help support the people that are doing this notable work. And I hope people will recognize that, that I did lend support, that I do care, and that at least some amount of progress was made with the hope that we'll see a lot more in the future.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Wonderful. Is there any last piece of advice? Thoughts? Any message for us?

**Dr. David Munson:** No, I just want to thank you, Muller, for the important work you're doing now in heading up our advanced program. This is a big step for any of our faculty members to take on this kind of an assignment, especially when, as your question kind of alludes to, you and others have been inventing this, and it'll always be reinvented. And so this is not a cookie cutter kind of exercise. And one of the difficulties is that it involves working with human beings. And humans are complicated, organizations are complicated. But I think everybody can be proud of the amount of progress that's been made here at RITa and under your leadership. I look forward to see what happens next.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Thank you very much. Thank you for taking the time to be with us, Dr. Bhaskar.

**Dr. David Munson:** Thank you.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** We really appreciate you. The podcast for us.

**Dr. David Munson:** Okay. Go Tigers.

**Dr. Malar Hirudayaraj:** Thank you.