

MERISTEM Program Brings Together Women Leaders from Across DU

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When Professor of Biology Anna Sher first reached out to the National Science Foundation about their ADVANCE grants for gender equity in STEM, the program officers told her that to be successful the project had to include buy-in from administration and support from the social sciences.

“The more I thought about it and the more I talked to people, the more I realized we have resources at DU for many different facets of this issue,” Sher says.

Sher was able to get support from the highest levels of administration, with Chancellor Jeremy Haefner and Provost Mary Clark having both participated in ADVANCE grants at previous institutions, and Provost Clark signing on as

the primary investigator (PI) for DU. Sher also invited Deb Ortega, professor in the Graduate School of Social Work and founding director of the [Latinx Center](#), to provide the expertise they needed to ground the proposal in social science research. And then she started to look at the faculty, staff and committees across the University that were already working on equity in their areas.

“It was really wonderful to realize that we women scientist faculty were not alone.” Sher says. “Not only was there expertise across campus that we can and should tap into, but they wanted to be involved—they cared about it.”

Sher invited stakeholders and supporters from across the university, with a final team of 5 co-PIs and nearly 40 other faculty, administrators and other staff joining the effort. Senior Vice Provost for Research and Graduate Education Corinne Lengsfeld, who is also a faculty member in the Ritchie School of Engineering and Computer Science, was an early addition to the group. She noted how even though the grant is focused on STEM, its outcomes will have a wider footprint, just like its contributors.

“MERISTEM pilots and tests a program in science and engineering where women faculty—especially women faculty of color—struggle, and the programs and initiatives that work there could be extended campus wide and create dramatic, impactful institutional change,” Lengsfeld says.

Sher and the cross-campus team [won the nearly \\$1 million ADVANCE grant](#) with their proposal and work officially began in January 2022. Along with piloting policies and support systems that aim to make a difference across campus, MERISTEM is focused on supporting historically excluded faculty across the lifecycle of their careers. They’re doing this through three groups that address different areas of the faculty experience.

DU-GROW

Led by Director of the [Division of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion](#) and Co-PI Kristin Deal, DU-GROW focuses on the first stage of faculty’s engagement with DU, the faculty search and hiring process. Deal leads the faculty search trainings in her role in the Division of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion. While working with the search committees is part of DU GROW, Deal notes that they plan for their efforts to go beyond those groups.

“Search committees are part of a larger ecology that includes leadership: deans, search chairs, department chairs, directors,” Deal says. She adds that the group plans to address the entire ecology.

Deal also sees connections between DU GROW and the other areas of MERISTEM. For her, it’s important that progress is being made on the culture of DU before and while DU-GROW works to invite historically excluded faculty in.

DU-DEVELOP

DU-DEVELOP is led by Director of Faculty Development and Career Advancement Alison Staudinger in the office of the [Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs](#) (VPFA).

“The VPFA’s office is also a hub for developing mentoring initiatives for supporting faculty throughout the lifecycle and for doing those things with an equity lens, so it made sense to be involved,” Staudinger says.

DU-DEVELOP is exploring a range of mentoring methods that could be used together to support faculty with a variety of needs. They plan to build on what some units on campus have already implemented through [Mentoring and Onboarding Across Rank and Series](#) (MOARS), an inclusion-focused initiative. Two faculty mentoring liaisons will support departments that are piloting mentoring initiatives and manage a faculty mentoring fund to compensate faculty who are trained as equity-minded mentors.

DU-HEAL

In addition to the issues being addressed GROW and DEVELOP, Sher said the group wanted to address the culture of the STEM disciplines at DU.

“I realized that at its heart what we needed was healing,” says Sher, who is leading the DU-HEAL group.

MERISTEM’s proposal for promoting healing focuses on creating a pathway for historically excluded faculty to bring forward concerns. They aim to create a process for faculty to seek solutions that is somewhere between speaking to an ombudsperson and filing a Title IX report. This intermediate option is meant to help the University take action to create a new culture and environment.

“So often, when we talk about women struggling in workplace, there’s all of this emphasis on what can we train the women to do. Women need to lean in, women need to dress differently, women need to talk differently,” Sher says. It’s not the women or historically excluded faculty who need to change, Sher adds. “The system needs to change.”

As the cross-campus team works to instill that change, Sher is encouraged by the dedication of her teammates.

“The people I’ve gotten to know across campus through this has been a wonderful, unexpected benefit,” Sher says. “It really makes me hopeful that this program will have an enormous impact.”

More information about MERISTEM can be found at the [program's website](#).

This article originally appeared on science.du.edu:

<https://science.du.edu/news/meristem-program-brings-together-women-leaders-across-du>