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ONE WAY TO FIGHT FOR EQUITY IN SCIENCE: NOMINATE MORE MINORITIES FOR BIG PRIZES

Many such prizes don't even come with award money, but they boost people's careers.

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The 30-person, all-volunteer team has less than a month to go before their deadline, but they're not worried. They're not procrastinators. They started their work in December, have been holding conference calls every other week since January, and have already turned in their first batch of packages. They call themselves the nomination task force, and their goal is to nominate more women and underrepresented minorities for awards from the American Geophysical Union, a professional society for Earth and space scientists that has about 60,000 members.

"These are actually pretty seminal awards," says Allison Jaynes, an assistant professor of space physics at the University of Iowa and a nomination task force member. "Any of the awards or honors are extremely impactful for your career, for how you might be received or treated at your home institution"—that is, whether your employer gives you promotions and raises—"so obviously when people have been overlooked for these honors, it's a little bit appalling."

The task force formed last year, with a NASA physicist named Liz MacDonald. Over the course of a few years before that, the proportion of American Geophysical Union award-winners who were women had been dropping, from 35 to 31 to 22 percent, even though the union's membership had remained steady at around 27 percent female. MacDonald rallied volunteers to think of worthy, overlooked union members and to create "nomination packages" for them, which are a bit like college applications that someone else writes for you. They require a nomination letter, the nominee's resume, and three additional letters of recommendation from senior scientists. Each takes about 20 hours of work, Jaynes says. Last year's nomination task force organized six packages, two of which nabbed their nominees American Geophysical Union prizes, and one of which the task force decided to send to the American Meteorological Society, where the nominee received a fellowship. "It worked," Jaynes, MacDonald, and another colleague, Amy Keese, wrote for *Eos*, a digital newsletter sponsored by the union.

Around the middle of last year, a movement began to strip awards and training grants from scientists who had been found, by either courts or their workplaces, guilty of harassing others. Prestigious awards help protect harassers and lock old boys' networks in place, activists told me at the time. Efforts like the nomination task force's are the other side of that coin. They're a way of distributing professional power to those who lack it. A professional award "opens so many doors," Jaynes says. "So you think: Well, the people that really need to have doors opened for them are the ones who aren't even getting nominated."

The nominee pool isn't the only place in the prize process where gender bias shows up, nor is the American Geophysical Union the only professional science society that can be unrepresentative in its award-giving. Research from the Association for Women in Science, analyzing 18 science societies with a total membership of about 500,000, found that men are disproportionately likely to win prizes celebrating their intellectual contributions, while women are disproportionately likely to win teaching awards. "Unconscious biases—social stereotypes held by both men and women—de-value women's intellectual achievements," Heather Metcalf, the association's director of research, writes. These stereotypes perpetuate the "myth that men are inherently better mathematicians and scientists than women" and can hurt women's careers.

But fairer nominations can help. Women and underrepresented minorities win prizes at more representative rates when they make up at least 30 percent of the nominee pool, Metcalf's work found. In addition, in September of 2018, a blog post from the American Geophysical Union's leadership validated MacDonald's strategy of targeting its nomination pool. After a year in which only 18 percent of American Geophysical Union awards went to women, the union's president and president-elect wrote that women were being under-nominated for prizes "when controlling for career stage and other factors."

The union does not collect data about other characteristics of its members, such as their race, sexual orientation, or ability, although it does have statistics for how many members are based outside of the United States. Non-U.S. members, especially those from developing countries, are also underrepresented in awards.

Since September, union president Robin Bell says she's explicitly told leaders of sub-sections of the union to submit prize nominees who are more reflective of their membership. "We're really trying to see if we can get the community to embrace looking for and making sure diverse nominations happen, instead of it being a sort of top-down effort," she says. Union leadership also started implicit bias training for the prize judges and moved back the awards deadline, to try to get more nominees.

The nomination task force is small. It's composed only of space physicists, and they only nominate folks within their field. Other fields within the union include scientists focused on clouds, the ocean, earthquakes and volcanoes, and climate change. Jaynes has heard of other sub-sections of the union forming their own task forces, but she isn't sure which are; neither is Bell.

Jaynes hopes the article she and her colleagues published to Eos will inspire others. She appreciates help from male union members and members who are more established in their careers, who lend credibility to the effort. The nomination task force includes both, Jaynes says.

For Bell, it's especially important that these efforts take root among the union membership because that's what will create sustained change. "What will last longer is if we can make a cultural difference," she says.