

Building a Cohort of Women in Academic Forestry Programs

By Mindy A. Crandall and Jessica E. Leahy

It all started with a casual hallway conversation: where were all the women?

What prompted our chat in the fall of 2015 was reflecting that in 2014 there were no women graduates in the forestry program at the University of Maine (UMaine) where we were both professors in the School of Forest Resources. Yet that freshman cohort had contained several women. Where had they gone? What had happened? And this wasn't an isolated case. There was only a single woman who graduated in the classes of 2009 and 2016.

During the chat, we also reflected on our own personal history. Back in the fall of 1995, both of us were young students entering Oregon State University's College of Forestry, one of



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us (Jessica) coming from rural Alaska and one (Mindy) coming from the rural Oregon Coast range. We had similar feelings shared probably by many young rural people entering a big public university, wondering how we'd navigate an unfamiliar system in a "city" and how we'd fit in.

Those feelings of uncertainty were given an extra dimension in the forestry program. Sitting in the first class of the program, F111 (Intro to Forest Resources) together that fall, it was hard not to notice that we were two of just a handful of women in the incoming class. So it was particularly striking to stand together, 20 years later, looking at incoming university cohorts with still just a handful of women—and many of those changing majors before graduation. In those intervening 20 years, women had made serious inroads into many traditionally male-dominated fields. Why hadn't we seen the same progress in forestry? Why was forestry still struggling to recruit and retain women undergraduates? Forestry employers were reaching out, seeking to improve the diversity of their workforce, but there were no women foresters to interview or hire because

we couldn't get these students through the educational pipeline.

We couldn't answer definitively why conditions for women in forestry programs haven't improved over two decades. We couldn't improve recruitment—we couldn't realistically go out to every elementary, middle, and high school and let girls know that forestry was a great career option. But we were in a position to potentially help those who arrived at UMaine as freshmen, and those who were struggling to feel like they belonged over those stressful four years of undergraduate education. We valued our informal network of "bad-ass" women foresters that we had cultivated over years in the field, one that focused on validation, education, and shared experiences. That informal network was what we turned to for advice on jobs, for information on how to succeed, and for a feeling of belonging during all those times of being the only woman in a room. What if we created a formal group for those students identifying as women, one that they could access right at the beginning of their careers?

Launching SWIFT

At its inception, SWIFT stood for Supporting Women in Forestry Today and started at UMaine in 2016. It's a group open to anyone identifying as a woman or gender minority. There's no memberships or requirements. Instead, it's a series of events designed to support and encourage women in their forestry education and careers, and foster a more inclusive community. SWIFT does this through four key approaches: providing education about gender discrimination, helping participants develop (and share!) strategies for success in a male-

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dominated field, improve networking opportunities, and provide education for and about the role of men, as allies and potential means of support and cultural change.

These events can take many forms, and each one supports one or more of the four approaches. Some are informal meet-and-greet potlucks that welcome new women to the department and provide an opportunity to get to know one another, thus building networks and camaraderie. Some are educational sessions that cover current research on gender discrimination and its impacts; these sessions build knowledge and understanding of one's own lived experience. Some provide opportunities for role-playing difficult situations or talking through events in small groups to develop multiple strategies for success.

The most popular events have provided a space for women to get together and explore forestry through chainsaw trainings, bird identification hikes, or all-women field tours. These sessions build confidence in and identification with the profession itself. And events open to all genders in the



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One of the events offered through SWIFT is chainsaw trainings. These women-only events provide a welcoming space and it's been observed that students are less likely to "hang back" as is the case in a co-ed classroom setting.

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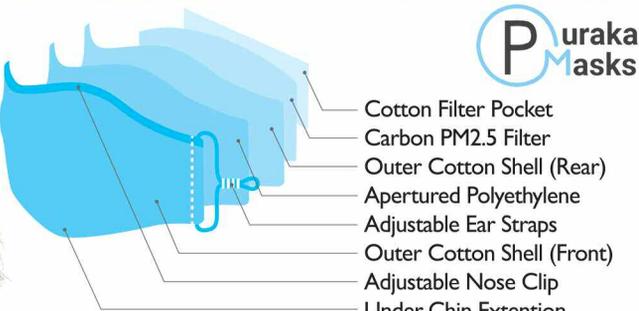
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department help both build education, create allies, and foster a more inclusive culture.

While SWIFT clearly stands on the shoulders of every group of women in forestry who have gathered, both formally and informally over the years at events like women's happy hours during conferences or targeted mentoring programs, it also has some unique elements. First, it intentionally builds relationships and networks both within a given cohort but also across

all ranks since it's open to everyone from undergraduates to graduate students to faculty and staff. It's also a group with a formal structure and stated values that is steered by an all-volunteer, consensus-based planning team, with members drawn from all ranks, and consistently emphasizes providing participants with agency and positive tools for success.

Finally, we believe the framework of SWIFT is both structured and flexible enough to be utilized in many dif-

ferent settings. If you're interested in learning more about SWIFT or setting up a similar program, we are available for phone, Zoom, or in-person consultations if you reach out!

SWIFT's future

SWIFT continues to refine its mission and programming, adapting to new ideas and challenges (like providing events over Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic). One noteworthy change is a name change from Supporting Women in Forestry Today to just SWIFT—with no definition of the acronym. This is an intentional change to reflect that we are adapting how we describe the group and its participants, in response to being approached by non-binary students advocating for SWIFT to be more inclusive of all genders beyond men. These non-binary students shared similar experiences with inclusion as our women students did, so we find ourselves more and more using the term “gender minority” rather than women. We all share the challenges and opportunities of not being men in forestry. This active inclusiveness has felt right to our group.

That said, sometimes changes are suggested that SWIFT does not incorporate. Some people outside of SWIFT have suggested that our group take it a step further in inclusivity to cover all “others” in the School of Forest Resources. That would mean expanding the mission of SWIFT to support forestry students who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or People of Color) or first-generation college students, as examples. While we agree that these students absolutely deserve an inclusive and supportive environ-

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Our Favorite Ally—Keith Kanoti, University of Maine Forest Manager

We hear a lot these days about being an ally. When we considered who had been influential as an ally to women foresters at the University of Maine, the name that rose to the top wasn't someone who probably set out to be an ally. Not that he would be opposed to it, either—it's just probably that he didn't think much of it one way or another. The qualities that make Keith Kanoti, the university Forest Manager, a great ally is his curiosity, openness to new ideas, and willingness to try out those ideas.

As an employer of forestry students and as the primary venue for class-based field work, the University Forest can play a direct role in increasing gender diversity in the field by training more women. These initial experiences in the field and local entry-level positions are often how young foresters dip their toes into the formal work environment. As such, they provide a critical door into the profession, one that can be open and inclusive and build a person's love of the profession, or can be closed and exclusive and lead people to turn away from a career in forestry.

So how can someone like a University Forest Manager be such a great ally? First, thanks to conversations with us and others involved in SWIFT, Keith quickly realized that he can take a role in actively advertising and reaching out to a wide variety of potential student workers, rather than waiting for those who are ‘in the know’ and bold enough to knock on his door. Active recruitment of a more diverse pool is increasingly a best practice in hiring. Keith held an open mind and observed first-hand the difference in events that were women-only. After our first chainsaw training, he commented that he now understood why it was important, how women with no prior chainsaw experience were more eager to participate in that supportive environment, rather than hanging back. And he took the initiative to support both of these ideas, hiring more women and supporting them in their training, even going out of his way to purchase more inclusive gear for the University Forest! He bought PPE that covered the range of sizes needed for women, including steel-toed overshoes (since finding appropriate work boots in women's sizes is an ongoing challenge), smaller sizes of chaps, and smaller chainsaws.

An unexpected bonus? The men on the crews prefer the new chainsaws, too. When you're cutting all day, everyone's arms appreciate a lighter saw and a shorter bar!

Being an ally doesn't always mean going to a special training or signing a pledge (although that certainly can play a role). There's a lot that people can do through the regular course of their work, by simply watching and observing with an open mind, listening to the experiences of their colleagues, and taking small actions to welcome all to the profession of forestry.



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Bernardi for a research sociologist position in California, her complaint garnered compensation but not the job. Fed up, she and other women filed a class-action lawsuit in the California region over sexual discrimination. The issue dragged on for years as the agency failed time and again to comply. In the end, the Forest Service was compelled to hire more women. As women moved into traditional male roles like smoke-jumper, forest ranger, and law enforcement, they faced backlash and discrimination from many, but found encouragement from others, like Larson did. But the issue of underrepresentation and discrimination has persisted. While the agency has worked for half a century to ensure that the composition of its workforce increasingly resembles that of the American public it serves, in all likelihood, the agency's hiring and promotion practices will remain under scrutiny until parity is achieved and discrimination is eliminated.

Since the agency's founding, women have been contributing to the Forest Service's mission and conservation as a whole. For much of its history, the agency continually kept women out of the traditionally male professional fields, simply by declaring certain jobs as inappropriate for women, even though women had proven themselves capable when given the chance. Faced with legal action in the 1970s regarding how it managed its personnel, the Forest Service had no choice but to change its ways. It took female employees forming their own "club"—more precisely, a legal class—to force the agency to redefine what was considered gender-appropriate work. In many ways, today's situation echoes Miss Peyton's plea: Imagine what can be gained by looking at employees for their potentialities, and not their sex. *WF*

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ment that is frequently lacking in forestry, it's tone deaf to suggest that the experiences of all "others" in forestry are the same! There's a role for groups like SWIFT to maintain their original mission, while also supporting efforts to expand inclusivity and equity across multiple identities. We have chosen to offer our group model and advice to newly forming groups instead, and participate in or support those efforts as appropriate.

Increasing women participation

Based on our experience, we believe the flexibility of the SWIFT model can work in many settings, from education to workplaces. Individual aspects of SWIFT programming could be borrowed for efforts to foster more inclusive communities, such as a women in forestry potluck, women-only forestry-focused field events, and gender-focused education and training events, for either only gender minorities, or for all genders. Providing tools to men to better understand others' experiences, along with tips for being allies, has been a successful component of SWIFT.

A peer-reviewed evaluation of the SWIFT program was published in the *Journal of Forestry*. (The article is available for free at the USDA Forest Service's Treearch website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treearch/pubs/59428>.) This article goes into much more detail and is a great starting place for those who might want to start a similar program at their school or workplace. We also talk about some of the relevant research that guided SWIFT, and the results and feedback we've gotten from SWIFT participants. They are powerful words that have had a big impact on us. *WF*

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How SWIFT events begin

An aspect of SWIFT that has borrowed heavily from research in ethical communication to support diversity, equity, and inclusion is our ground rules. The ground rules are read aloud at the beginning of each meeting. Reading them aloud serves as both a reminder and an opportunity for recommitment among all participants, including the meeting lead, of the norms that we want to operate under. The ground rules begin with a call to assume positive intent on the part of our fellow participants in order to minimize offense. Some of the topics we talk about are tricky and can elicit big emotional reactions! We all have to work on setting aside our 'knee-jerk' reactions. There are several ground rules related to being an active listener and creating space for all to participate, by seeking to understand others before focusing on your response; by letting as many people participate before commenting again; and not being afraid of silence.

We are also dealing with topics where there's no right or wrong response or way to feel. So, several ground rules cover facets related to that. We ask people to respond with questions, not advice or corrections; to respect others' experiences, including their understanding of a situation or their response; and to understand that everyone's story is complex and evolving. What someone chooses to share may not be the full story, or may not even be over. Overall, we aim to limit judgement, maintain confidentiality, and do our best to foster a truly safe and inclusive environment to support as much participation as possible.