



Factors Influencing the Success of Women in the Geosciences: An Example from the U.S. Geological Survey

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A review of my education and 30 year career at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), starting as a field assistant in 1979 to becoming Chief Scientist for Geology in 2001, reveals some of the critical success factors for women in the geosciences as well as factors that inhibit success. Women comprised 5% of the geosciences workforce when I started as an undergraduate in 1975, so why did I pursue the geosciences? A high school course covering earth and biological field science was taught by an excellent teacher who encouraged me to pursue geology. In college, several factors influenced my continuation in geology: two supportive mentors, an earth science department providing a broad diversity of courses; opportunities to take graduate courses, interaction with graduate students, and doing an undergraduate thesis. Most important was the individual attention given to undergraduates by both faculty and graduates regardless of gender. The summer intern program sponsored by the National Association of Geology Teachers and the USGS was a deciding factor to my becoming a geoscientist in the public service. Family and job concerns made it difficult to complete a doctorate however, and there existed gender bias against women conducting field work. Critical factors for success at USGS included: dealing ethically, openly, and immediately with gender-biased behavior, taking on responsibilities and science projects out of my “comfort zone”, having the support of mentors and colleagues, and always performing at the highest level. In the past 15 years, there have been many “first” women in various leadership roles within the USGS, and now, after 131 years, we have the first woman Director. It is important to note that as gender barriers are broken at the upper levels in an organization, it paves the way for others. Statistics regarding women are improving in terms of percentage of enrollment in degrees and jobs in the private, public, and academic sectors. Women, however, still bear the brunt of decision-making in work and family life issues no matter what the occupation, and thus need the support of colleagues, community, law, and family to continue succeeding at the highest levels of government, business, and academia.