Recruiting women to faculty positions in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines is notoriously difficult. Part of the problem is that faculty recruiters rely on inadequate recruiting techniques that result in small applicant pools and few qualified candidates to choose from.

To address this issue, Kansas State University’s College of Engineering has implemented an initiative that provides competitive awards for search committees and departments to develop novel, proactive recruiting strategies that focus on diversity. The Recruiting to Expand Applicant Pools (REAP) initiative is part of K-State’s National Science Foundation ADVANCE Institutional Transformation award.

Three years into this five-year project, Ruth Dyer, K-State’s associate provost and a professor of electrical and computer engineering, and Beth Montelone, dean of K-State’s College of Arts and Sciences and a professor of biology, spoke with Academic Leader about the progress they’ve made and lessons learned in recruiting women for faculty positions in STEM disciplines.

“We’ve learned that it’s really about changing the way people think about recruiting, that faculty members in a department that either has open positions or will in the short term should be on the lookout for candidates if they give talks at other institutions and should be spreading the word about these openings,” Montelone says. “We need to change the mind-set that to do a search all you do is post an ad in the Chronicle [of Higher Education] or in Science and wait for the letters to come in. It’s not like that anymore. If you want good candidates, you’ve got to seek them out.”

The amount of each award—$2,000 to $4,000—“is a relatively small investment for the type of return they’re getting,” Dyer says.

Most departments have used the awards

- to fund faculty travel to professional meetings where they talk about open faculty positions and have individual consultations with potential candidates;
- to fund faculty travel to other institutions that have in their disciplines large populations of graduate students and postdocs who might be interested in applying for faculty positions; and
- to advertise openings in a variety of media, including Listservs and professional magazines.
The Department of Chemical Engineering used its $4,000 REAP award in the 2004–2005 academic year for

- advertisements of position openings in publications and on websites;
- distribution of position announcements at an NSF-sponsored workshop for female engineers interested in faculty positions;
- visits by the department head and two full professors to six universities to meet with potential candidates, highlighting student excellence, faculty research expertise, interdisciplinary research projects, resources that support teaching, internal funding opportunities, university policies on family and medical leave, dual-career assistance, and the ADVANCE program; and
- individual consultations between the department head and applicants and potential candidates at the annual American Institute of Chemical Engineers meeting.

These efforts resulted in twice as many female applicants and nearly five times as many overall applicants as during the most recent previous search in the department.

Feedback from candidates who responded to these aggressive recruitment techniques also indicate their effectiveness. “These candidates said that the personal contact was the thing that mattered more than anything else—that the department head or faculty member came to their institution or to a conference, met with them individually, followed up, sent emails, and encouraged them to apply,” Montelone says.

One factor that might encourage a female candidate to accept an offer is the culture within the department. A department with several female faculty members who feel welcome and supported would likely be an inviting option for female candidates. But for some disciplines, such as electrical and mechanical engineering, there are very few female faculty members. Since this is a common situation in many institutions, a lack of female faculty members is not a competitive disadvantage in recruiting women.

“It’s important that the interview process is structured so that the female applicant has the opportunity to meet with women from other related departments. If they’re being recruited in chemical engineering and there are no female faculty members in chemical engineering, maybe they could meet with women in chemistry or in other engineering disciplines or in material science, physics, math, or whatever other related disciplines there might be in which there are already female faculty members on campus,” Dyer says.
In addition to introducing female candidates to female faculty members, it helps to connect candidates with other resources on campus. For example, K-State’s director of the Women in Engineering and Science Program meets with female faculty candidates to connect with other women on campus and to show the resources that are available.

“I think it’s very important, when female candidates are on campus, to describe the types of programs that an institution has that can help them be successful with teaching, research, and service duties. Describing the opportunities on campus, the programs that are available, [the] funding that is available, [and the] groups that they can join is a very strong selling point,” Dyer says.

Contact Ruth Dyer at rdyer@ksu.edu and Beth Montelone at bethmont@ksu.edu.