Fix the leaky pipeline!
A career-building program for women in science

Account on the Information Event in Berne, April 19th, 2013
SNF, Plenum 21, Wildhainweg 21, 3001 Berne

The Information Event of the “Fix the leaky pipeline” program took place in the SNF premises in Berne on April 19th 2013 and brought together over 90 female scientists at PhD. and postdoc level from the ETH domain (EPFL: 36, ETHZ: 33, PSI: 10, EMPA: 7, WSL: 5 EAWAG: 3). Including the coaches & trainers, invited guests, the members of the Equal Opportunities Offices of all ETH-domain institutions & the program management team over 100 female scientists were present at the event.

After a brief welcome message by the new project leader Dr. Mihaela Falub, she gave a general description and pointed out the novel activities of the program and its agenda. Alexandra von Schack, project coordinator, presented the events taking place in Lausanne.

The coaches and trainers of the program then presented themselves and explained their course offerings. All of them have been working for this program since its pilot phase, 2007-2008, namely Dr. Pamela Alean-Kirkpatrick, Dr. Monika Clausen, Prof. Marcel Goldschmid, Dr. Sarah Shephard and Dr. Lille Springall.
Participants appreciated very much the possibility to have a first contact with them, to discuss with them and have quick answers to their primary questions.

After the coffee break, a 90 minute panel discussion “Academic Careers for women” moderated by Dr. Sarah Shepard (ETHZ) was held with five guests representing almost all institutions of the ETH-Domain:

- Prof. Anna Fontcuberta i Morral, EPFL
- Dr. Alexandra Kroll, EAWAG
- Prof. Kristina Shea, ETHZ
- Prof. Helena van Swygenhoven, PSI & EPFL
- Dr. Tanja Zimmermann, EMPA

The panel members presented the major turning points in their career paths; one after the other, they talked about the decisions they took as women, the choices and compromises they had to make at some points in their lives, but also about the pride they had in pursuing a not always easy goal. They addressed the challenges of wanting to climb the ladder in their field, while wanting to build a family, and traveling the world to get international experience in their field.
The 90 minutes went by very fast and an animated discussion continued during the coffee break. After this, questions from the audience were addressed to the panel members. Dr. Sarah Shephard moderated the talk in a very respectful and lively way, using flip charts to pin down important ideas and milestones. Amongst the advice the panel members gave to the audience was the following points:

- Go abroad
- Choose the right partner, but also the right boss! Negotiate!
- Collect mentors!
- Have the courage to speak about your ideas
- Keep your head down & do good research (& be a nice person)

The participants were eager to debate with these successful women and all seemed to highly appreciate the input and the (sometimes quite) personal issues these scientists were willing to share. The more dynamic the discussion got, the more hands were raised to give comments or ask questions; after the official part of the program each panel member was surrounded by a group of women, continuing the mentoring process for another hour or longer.

During the coffee break at the end of the panel discussion, active discussions took place and the guests were surrounded by a large group of women, continuing the debate and inquiring about more the mentoring process until eventually all had to run off to catch their trains. Certain discussions probably continued on the trains back to Zurich or Lausanne.

This information event provided a good start to the “Fix-the-leaky-pipeline” program, which is now at its 3rd edition. It gave all the participants an insight into what they can expect during the next year from the coaching groups and the courses, and what they will be able to learn from these. The role models also emphasized how grateful they would have been if such a program had been available to them at this critical juncture in their careers.

Alexandra von Schack
Program Fix the Leaky Pipeline
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