

Rita R. Colwell Impact Fund launched to support women in science

New Fund to help close the gender gap in STEM fields

IRVINGTON, NEW YORK, U.S. , May 17, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- It is broadly acknowledged that to combat the major issues that humanity faces, diverse viewpoints, experiences, and expertise across all sectors of society are necessary. But, globally, this diversity is lacking in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) where fewer than 30% of researchers are women. In Japan, this number shrinks to below 20%.

To help lessen this gap, the [OIST Foundation](#), a New York-based not-for-profit organization, in partnership with

the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University ([OIST](#)), launched the Rita R. Colwell Impact Fund for the Advancement of Women in Science on May 19th 2021.

This Fund will go towards fostering a culture of diversity and gender equality on the OIST campus further, nurturing women and girls interested in science in Okinawa and creating opportunities for women to advance their careers and become leaders in the field.

Dr. Rita Colwell is a distinguished microbiologist and a member of the OIST Board of Governors. Despite the numerous challenges that came with being a pioneering woman in her research, she has had an extraordinary career — completing vital work in health, water, and global infectious diseases research. In addition to being on the OIST Board, Dr. Colwell became the first woman to serve as the Director of the United States National Science Foundation from 1998 to 2004, and is a Distinguished Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park and the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Dr. Colwell said that she is deeply honored to have such an important fund bear her name.



“Diversity is critical,” Dr. Colwell emphasized. “We know that companies that have a diverse board of management are more productive and profitable. It increases the stock of opinions, recommendations, and perspectives. The strategic direction is broadened. This is how we can utilize the full talent of the human race and we need all the talent given the struggles we face — COVID-19, inequality, poverty, climate change, to name a few.”

When speaking about her own experiences, Dr. Colwell acknowledged that her career didn't follow a straight line but that was because she was blocked at many steps along of the way. “Teachers wouldn't write letters of recommendation for women seeking a career in science or engineering. I was told that fellowships were not to be wasted on women. Things are getting better now, but it will take generations. “

“I believe OIST is very much needed in Japan — it's a place of wonderful diversity and excellent research. I'm very proud to be on the OIST Board, which makes a dedicated effort to recruit women scientists. I hope this fund can be used to attract many more women to OIST so their careers can be developed and nurtured.”

In the 2020 OIST student cohort, 30 of the 62 students are female, which is in stark contrast to many other Japanese universities. There is also a strong cultural diversity at OIST — 83% of PhD students and 63% of faculty were recruited from outside Japan.

Further highlighting the importance of this Fund is astronomer Dr. Yuko Kakazu, who is from Okinawa. She is now the outreach specialist at the Subaru Telescope and NAOJ Thirty Meter Telescope Project in Hawai'i and the Education Ambassador for the OIST Foundation.

“I wish a place like OIST existed when I was growing up,” she said. “When I was a student, there was this idea that women should stay at home and not leave Okinawa. There were no role models, no scientists around me. When I started my undergraduate degree, I was told by one of my professors that women weren't meant to study physics. There were only three of us out of 200 students.”

“The situation is slowly getting better in Japan but we're still so far behind. This Fund can be used to inspire more women to enter the STEM fields, to show them that becoming a scientist is a viable career option.”

To support the Rita R. Colwell Impact Fund for the Advancement of Women in Science, please contact:

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