



Dr. Juliane Strauss-Soukup, Assistant Professor of Chemistry at Creighton University, with Clare Boothe Luce scholars Natalie German and Kelley Wanzeck.
COURTESY OF CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY

Opportunities for Women in Science

THE CLARE BOOTHE LUCE PROGRAM

Joan E. DeBello still remembers what it was like as an undergraduate science major to be the only female student in most of her physics and mathematics classes and to have no female professors teaching those courses. “It was intimidating at first. There were times I really needed outside encouragement.”

DeBello received that encouragement when she won a Clare Boothe Luce (CBL) scholarship for her junior and senior years at St. John’s University in New York City. The CBL scholars at her school were mentored by female science faculty who previously had worked only with graduate students, and her fellow scholars provided mutual support to each other. Now an associate professor of mathematics and computer science at St. John’s College of Professional Studies, DeBello credits the program with sustaining her interest in science and setting her on an academic track. “Without that program I wouldn’t be where I am today,” she says. “To have that kind of support as an undergraduate and to be connected to students who were going through the same things I was experiencing made a big difference. I began to see that an academic career in science might be possible.”

Since 1989 the Clare Boothe Luce Program has sought to increase the presence and strengthen the role of women in the fields of mathematics, science and engineering by providing a range of opportunities to advance academic careers. In addition to undergraduate scholarships, the program offers graduate and postdoctoral fellowships and it funds CBL Professorships that create new tenure-track faculty positions. The professorships in particular serve as a powerful incentive for institutional change. Universities seeking grants must demonstrate a commitment to attract and retain

women science faculty by creating a supportive environment for their work.

Juliane Strauss-Soukup was one of the first undergraduate CBL scholars at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. After completing her graduate studies, she returned to Creighton as a Clare Boothe Luce Assistant Professor of Chemistry. The CBL appointment came with discretionary funds that allowed her to get important research off the ground, leading to additional support from the National Institutes of Health. Now a tenured professor, Soukup mentors undergraduate CBL scholars and each year invites several to work in her lab—an experience she hopes will whet their appetite for graduate-level research. An evaluation of the CBL Program found that support for women professors has proved particularly effective in motivating female students to pursue science majors. “Having a female role model in science is inspiring for women undergraduates,” says Soukup. “I try to give students a sense of the challenges they might face in graduate school but also the rewards of this work.”

Another beneficiary of the program is Emily Weiss, who became a Clare Boothe Luce Assistant Professor in the department of chemistry at Northwestern University in 2008. She has already won six prestigious national awards for her research, including the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers. “It is definitely a boost for a junior faculty member to hold a named professorship, which usually comes much later in a scientist’s career,” she says. Weiss has not felt at a disadvantage being a woman in her field. But she recognizes the need for improvement. “The Clare Boothe Luce Program is important because it helps focus the attention of universities on the issue of gender disparities. It provides one more opportunity and incentive to increase their diversity.”

Despite the progress made in recent years, women are still a small minority on most science and engineering faculties. By expanding the number of strong role models for women in science, the CBL Program is helping to change that landscape. ■