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UW Encourages Women to Pursue Physics

January 12, 2012 Seattle— The University of Washington College of Arts and Sciences is working to change a troubling trend that is happening among young women who study physics in high school, but do not continue to do so in college.

According to the American Institute of Physics, women have made up almost half (47%) of high school physics students for the past 15 years, but the fraction of U.S. bachelor's degrees in physics awarded to women peaked at 23% in 2004, and has decreased to 20-21% more recently. The fraction of physics PhDs awarded to women was 19% in 2008.

To confront this trend, the UW is hosting The Northwest Conference for Undergraduate Women in Physics, a two-day conference for undergraduate physics majors, Friday, Jan. 13 through Sunday, Jan. 15 on the UW campus.

Keynote speaker Persis Drell, Director and Professor in the Department of Physics and Astrophysics at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center will speak live at Stanford and will be simulcast to UW and other locations. The purpose of the conference is to increase the number of women studying physics by revealing the wide range of opportunities available to students with physics degrees.

"It is of critical importance to our nation that both men and women contribute to the scientific labor force; we cannot exclude half our workforce and hope to be competitive," said Marjorie Olmstead, conference organizer and professor in the physics department.

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The Northwest Conference is part of a series of six simultaneous conferences hosting over 700 undergraduates over the three-day weekend. Stanford University, Case Western Reserve University, University of Tennessee, Texas A&M University and Yale University are all participating in the effort. The Northwest conference organizers expect more than 80 students from 25 different institutions, including community colleges, four-year colleges and universities.

By helping young women with career development, the conference aims to reinforce the interest of these young women in technical fields and to help them be more successful in their careers. The conference will present talks by women with a wide range of potential careers, including science policy, science education research and homeland security in addition to more traditional research in particle and semiconductor physics.

The program includes talks by female scientists with careers that span academia, industry and national laboratories, panel discussions about graduate school and careers in physics, presentations and discussions about women in physics, a student poster session, and networking opportunities. About 20 speakers and panelists with a wide breadth of experience will participate.

For more information, including a schedule, visit <http://depts.washington.edu/nwuwpc>.

About the College

The University of Washington College of Arts and Sciences provides an education of tremendous breadth and depth to more than 30,000 students while advancing research and scholarship in the arts, humanities, natural sciences and social sciences. With more than 8,000 classes offered in the College annually, students can study everything from art to physics. More than 70 percent of all the UW's Seattle campus bachelor's degrees and nearly 40 percent of all PhD degrees are from the College. The College also serves the community through the more than 280 performances, 60 exhibits and 100 public programs annually offered through the Henry Art Gallery, the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, UW World Series and Meany Hall for the Performing Arts. For further information, please visit <http://artsci.washington.edu/150>.