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Champion for Inclusion

University of Dayton

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Champion for Inclusion

The Society of Women Engineers presented Charles Browning, chair of the chemical and materials engineering department, with its Rodney D. Chipp Memorial Award for making inclusion a core workplace value; for taking the initiative to build diversity; and for creating vital success paths and processes for women.

Browning heads the chemical and materials engineering department at the University of Dayton, where he has worked since retiring from the Air Force's senior executive service in 2005. The students who have taken Dr. Browning's courses there know him as the recipient of the Torley Endowed Chair in Composite Materials Engineering and as an internationally recognized expert in advanced materials technology.

But what they may not know about the professor, who is a fellow in the Society for the Advancement of Material and Process Engineering and a former director of the Air Force Research Laboratory Materials and Manufacturing Directorate, is that the contribution he values most had little to do with materials science and everything to do with social change. From 1985, when he became branch chief of the Materials Laboratory's Structural Materials Branch, to 2005, when he completed his seventh year as the head of AFRL's Materials and Manufacturing Directorate, Dr. Browning worked tirelessly to bring a new spirit of diversity and inclusion to his research organization.

Early in his career, Dr. Browning noticed how few women and minorities worked in STEM fields. He believed that more diversity was needed to drive innovation. So, he committed himself to finding ways to build a diverse, inclusive, world-class talent pool.

Initially, he worked alone, within the existing federal system, implementing a low-profile, structured plan to recruit, hire, mentor, train and advance capable women. He created part-time or entry-level science and engineering positions, frequently funded out of his department's discretionary budget, filled them with strong female candidates, and then after sufficient mentoring and training, moved them into permanent slots as they became available.

To improve success rates, Dr. Browning sought out women with strong academic, communication and life skills. He asked them about the challenges they faced at work and found ways to remove those challenges. He continued to mentor and prepare them for advancement throughout their AFRL careers. Dr. Browning eventually hired and then
reassigned 99 women, adding them to what had previously been a 600-person, almost all-male, workforce. This first group of hires received 143 promotions into high-grade positions, including 22 supervisory roles.

Dr. Browning would go on to help develop two major STEM diversity initiatives: extending the Air Force's Science and Technology Workforce for the 21st Century program to include minority serving institutions and creating the Minority Leaders Research Collaboration Program, a private sector/university partnership targeting minority scientists and engineers, which the White House hailed as "The DoD Model."

Among Dr. Browning’s numerous awards are the Presidential Meritorious Rank Award and the Air Force Materiel Command EEO Management Action Award. He received a B.S. in chemistry from West Virginia University, an M.S. in chemistry from Wright State University, and a Ph.D. in materials engineering from the University of Dayton.

One highly successful female engineer who had worked in Dr. Browning's AFRL directorate summed up his contribution succinctly: "No one at the Air Force Research Laboratory has had a greater impact on the advancement and achievement of women engineers."

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