Background Information

A recent history of advances for women faculty at Penn begins with five women—Phoebe Leboy, Helen Davies, Madeleine Joullie, Phyllis Rackin, and Mildred Cohn.

As part of a committee chaired by Cohn in 1969, they recognized severe gender disparities throughout the university. Such disparities prompted the release of the Cohn Report revealing that only 7% of faculty members were women and 14 departments had no female faculty. After the University failed to respond to the report, the women formed Women for Equal Opportunity at the University of Pennsylvania (WEOUP). The organization was committed to equality in campus life and became the voice of the women’s activist community. WEOUP helped develop the Women’s Studies Program, and, in response to a series of on campus rapes in 1973, organized a sit-in at College Hall that led to improved security measures and the creation of the Penn Women’s Center.

These women acted as a catalyst for many of the advances that women faculty enjoy today. In June 2000, Provost Robert Barchi and Faculty Senate Chair Larry Gross established the Gender Equity Committee to evaluate the status of women faculty at Penn. The committee released the first annual Gender Equity Report on December 4, 2001, which led to the creation of the Senate Committee on Faculty Development, Diversity and Equity. As the name suggests, this committee addresses issues relevant to women faculty and minority faculty, with a focus on the creation of mentorship programs for all junior faculty across the university.

Another organization called the Association of Women Faculty and Administrators (AWFA) was founded in 1948 and changed its name to Penn Professional Women’s Network in 2004. While no longer active, its charge was to address the needs of both female faculty and administrators across the university. In recent years, however, it has become clearer that the needs of women faculty differ from those of women administrators.

In order to address diverging interests and the disparity between the number of male and female faculty across the university, a few women faculty members began a discussion with Provost Vincent Price to find a way to address these issues. In 2009, the Penn Forum for Women Faculty was realized, and in February 2010, it hosted the first annual Celebration of Women Faculty.