Dr. Beate Schmittmann to be new head of Tech’s Physics Department

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Kevin Anderson, CT City Reporter

Internationally renowned scholar Dr. Beate Schmittmann, professor in the field of theoretical condensed matter physics, has been named the department head of the Physics in Virginia Tech’s College of Science.

Schmittmann began working at Tech as an assistant professor of physics in 1990, becoming a full professor in 1997. She is known for her contributions to the understanding of non-equilibrium phenomena. Schmittmann received a degree from the University of Aachen in Germany and a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom. She hopes to promote the leadership of women in the fields of science and engineering.

How does it feel to be the first woman to head a male-dominated department?

It’s not that much of a new experience because I have had the experience of being the “only woman” or the “first woman” to do something before. I feel very comfortable actually. My colleagues have always been very friendly and respectful. I’ve known the other College of Science department heads in various contexts, so I’m with a group where I feel very comfortable.

How do you think this will influence other female students seeking a career in physics?

I hope that it will encourage them. I hope that people seeing a female face in the physics department and in this position will encourage them to say, “Hey, this is obviously doable. So let’s go do it.”

Do you think that by taking this position you will be contributing to eliminating gender inequalities in the sciences?

I’m certainly changing the statistics. Yes, I do feel that I am contributing towards eliminating some of the issues. I am very entwined in gender issues with women in science. Almost since the beginning of my working here this has been an issue near and dear to my heart. I hope to raise awareness for some of these issues, without making it something that we need drill into everyone’s minds.

Have you ever been discriminated against in this field because you are a woman?

Yes, when you are young and you go to a conference, some of the older guys will completely ignore you as if you were totally invisible.

What are some ways you are going to run the department? Are there any programs or research projects you have in mind?

We have had a lot of hiring in the past few years, and this is actually a younger department. So I will do everything I can to make sure everyone is successful; that everyone gets funded, and that everyone get the visibility in the physics community that they deserve. This is something that I will work very hard
for. I also want this department to be a place where people will like to work; a place where everyone will respect one another, and a place will meet all the needs of the students. We teach a lot of the engineering and life sciences students in addition to many physics students, so I will make sure everyone’s needs are respected and met.

What advice would you give to females studying physics who may be intimidated by the large male dominance in the field?

My advice would be to not take it seriously and stick with (physics.)

What are some other things girls can do to beat these gender inequalities in the sciences?

I would say two things. First, get together, meet other women, and network because you’ll find that you have similar thoughts about issues, and it’s always good to have them around and have that connection. Second, also be aware of the fact that men too are facing issues and that they also have to work hard to be successful, and everyone should work together not against one another.