Speakers inspire women to break glass ceiling
ConocoPhillips Canada support helps build relationships between the world’s top female scientists and UAlberta students

By Sheila Graham on February 21, 2017

University of Alberta graduate students with ConocoPhillips geologist Patricia Allwardt. From left: Ebberly MacLagan, Merilee Reynolds, Morgan Snyder, Allwardt, Carolyn Furlong and Danielle Simkus.

In science fields traditionally dominated by men, female role models are few and far between. Female mentors — professionals who can provide advice and networking contacts — are even scarcer.

That’s why a group of graduate students in the University of Alberta’s Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences found a way to introduce and connect students to women who are playing leading roles in the earth sciences.

“There is an implicit bias both men and women have in this field about who can do certain occupations, about who has certain skills,” says Janina Czas, a PhD student in the department who helped create the Grace Anne Stewart Speaker Series.

“There’s definitely a glass ceiling — we see very few women at that level, so some female students might think that’s not achievable.”

A $15,000 gift from ConocoPhillips Canada, one of the country’s largest oil and gas production and exploration companies, means the series can grow from an ad hoc, casual lecture series to one that brings female scientists from around the world to speak on campus.

Over two days, visiting scientists present a one-hour research talk and host an informal question-and-answer session about their career path. These sessions are attended by post-doctoral researchers, faculty members and — most importantly — by students like Czas.

The visiting speakers also participate in one-on-one or small-group meetings, which allow them to get to know students and faculty with shared interests.

The corporation’s donation of $5,000 a year for the next three years will cover travel and accommodation costs associated with broadening the scope of the speaker series.

“Now we can invite speakers who people in the department are really interested in meeting,” says Czas. “This wouldn’t have been possible without the support of CPC.”

The speaker series is named in honour of Grace Anne Stewart, who in 1918 became UAlberta’s first female geology graduate.

“Female mentors provide a different perspective on the challenges of academia, work environments and balancing a family with research,” says Czas, whose master’s supervisor was female. “These events are small, which provides lots of opportunity to interact.”

The expanded speaker series kicked off in November 2016 with a visit from Patricia Allwardt, a structural geologist with ConocoPhillips in Houston. Her presentation looked at structural evolution and petroleum system risk elements.

With files from Mifi Purvis

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