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Olin College president works to boost diversity, inclusion in science and engineering fields

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Gilda Barabino, President of Olin College of Engineering, has spent the first two years of her tenure focused on diversifying the campus community and contemplating how to make the field of engineering more inclusive.

A biomedical engineer trained in chemical engineering, Barabino earlier this year became president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the world's largest multidisciplinary scientific society. She hopes to use the platform to expose more young people to science and engineering at early ages to encourage a wider group of people to consider careers in the field. At Olin, which started in 1997 in Needham, Massachusetts, Barabino has been changing the school's approach to faculty recruitment and strengthening the school's corporate ties.



OLIN COLLEGE

Gilda Barabino, President of Olin College of Engineering in Needham, Massachusetts

In an interview with *The Business Journals*, Barabino said she wants to give faculty members more opportunities to engage with corporate partners to stay up on the latest industry needs and trends, and she talked about what she's learned from operating the college during the pandemic. The following is an edited transcript of the conversation.

What does your new role as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science mean to you, given how science has been questioned by politicians and media in the last two years?

I'm excited about it because it is such a huge platform for all the things that I stand for. I actually believe that it's so important for us to understand one another. By that I mean the scientists and engineers understanding the public and the policymakers and the public and the policymakers understanding scientists and engineers. Having opportunities and spaces to communicate together, to work on problems together, to understand and talk about what are some of those shared interests and focusing on public good. It's really about making society better and doing more for the public good. How do you work in service of others, either as an individual or as an organization? That will help us understand one another and break down the walls and barriers, particularly around things that end up being miscommunications or misunderstandings that don't move any of us forward.

You recently wrote that “opportunities and entryways into STEM careers are unequally available to all members of society.” Could you expand on that and talk about how Olin addresses this concern?

I think about who's already in the field and then how they dictate who else gets to come into the field. Part of making sure that we are more equitable in how we provide opportunities is the ability to help people understand the relevance of our fields to their lives. It's important to do that early. So, pre-college — even kindergarten. Help these young people understand how science and engineering is relevant to them and how it can actually enhance their own lives so they can see that it's not some unreachable, unattainable activity or profession that's only for some.

Then you have to continue that connection throughout their academic careers. You have to have opportunities for people to see people like them, which means you have to have teachers who are more representative of the demographics of society. A place like Olin that was founded on crossing disciplines and solving real-world problems. It was also founded on having gender equity. This idea that you start out with creating an institution that has equity in mind from the very beginning — and crossing the disciplines — is important for us to think about how we work across boundaries and break down unnecessary barriers. In the broadest sense, if we break down those kinds of silos and barriers, we are much more likely to have people work together towards the common good.

I know recruiting diverse faculty members has been a priority area for you. How is that going and how are you tracking that?

If you really want to have a diverse faculty, you have to have a diverse pool. If you want to have a diverse pool, you may have to do some things differently. You have to work harder. You may have to expand your networks. You also have to have some intentionality around setting goals and objectives (and then) you have to have leadership and accountability around it. We've had success this year. We set out to do a faculty search and we had nine finalists and six of the finalists were people of color. What did it take? I was so proud of our faculty. They reached out broadly across the whole country. They tapped their networks and other people's networks. They tried new things, (including) get together for candidates across the country over Zoom. It was an opportunity for them to interact with the whole community and to ask questions as candidates. We were looking for two positions and we ended up making four offers.

What does that look like on the student recruitment side?

You can't like just drop off some brochures. You really have to build relationships with those who are in contact with the students. That could be teachers, recruiters, family members. We put such effort into getting to know the person and having the person getting to know us. That's much more likely to attract people from different backgrounds and retain them.

What does a strong corporate partnership look like at Olin?

We have many long-term partnerships with companies around our senior capstone design. Companies will work with us and sponsor particular projects, but we also work with entities like organizations like Greentown Labs, (an incubator for climate startups). Our students have opportunities to work with them and do internships. We also have built an office that we call our Office of External Programs and Partnerships. We make a concerted effort to not just have sponsors but partners around the educational experience. These are long-term relationships with companies and other organizations that get to know us and they get to know all the students. It works really well in the sense that you're engaging them in helping design the experiences for the students. One of the things that I would love to see us build on is having immersive experiences for faculty as well as students. Creating a two-way street where people can go in and out of academic experiences and industry experiences.

What have you learned from running the college for two years now, especially during such a trying time?

I've learned to think about how do we adapt to meet the changing needs of the world. Even as an institution that was established for change, change is still hard. What happens is you innovate and you start to do some things well and the tendency is to keep doing them. Well, I think true innovation requires a lot of risk-taking. Maybe dropping some things and starting again. How do you keep things going that work well, but also at the same time have an element of reinvention to keep up with the constantly evolving world that we're trying to serve?

What does higher education need to do more broadly to better serve society and create a more diverse and inclusive workforce?

I think it's important for us to partner in looking at where are the opportunity gaps and then close them. Identify those (equity) gaps. There's plenty of talent to go around. Some of it to me is as simple as create more opportunities for better quality education. Stop having those gatekeepers. We have some places that do these early courses and they call them "weed-out courses." Why are you trying to weed people out? Get rid of all these gatekeepers and stop all the gatekeeping. That alone will help us with closing those opportunity gaps.

Hilary Burns

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