

SPECIAL REPORT

Women Make Notable Gains in Local STEM Workforce

TECHNOLOGY: *Data Shows San Diego Achieves Gender Parity in Physical and Life Sciences Sectors*

■ BY FRED GRIER



San Diego County is the third largest biotech hub in the country and ranks fifth nationally for the number of tech jobs. Most recently, the region hit a very important milestone by achieving gender parity in the Physical and Life Sciences workforce.

Despite making notable gains in female representation in the STEM workforce, women are significantly underrepresented in executive and management roles. In fact, research shows women in management account for only 26% of the national STEM workforce and 14% in San Diego County.

A San Diego-based nonprofit is determined to provide greater transparency and accountability through its biennial Index. As the voice of women in STEM, this women's advocacy organization serves

to fast track professional women through leadership development. By transforming female scientists and technologists into corporate leaders, Athena's goal is to widen the bridge and advance 1 million women leading in STEM by 2030. Athena members feature executives, aspiring leaders, entrepreneurs, and academia from all sectors of life sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics, healthcare, and defense as well as service providers.

"As the demand for STEM talent increases, women's share of those jobs remain relatively flat.

In an equitable workforce, men and women enjoy equal representation and equal pay," said Holly Smithson, chief executive officer of Athena. "We're not there yet in the fields of STEM. In key areas, San Diego County is leading the way in positive trends that promote women in STEM, but in other areas, it lags."

San Diego is home to world-leading companies such as **Qualcomm**, **Illumina** and **Teradata** (as well as more than 1,200 other life science and tech firms), as the region's economy thrives on having a talented, inspired and diverse pool of talent.

The Business Journal spoke to several diversity leaders working inside San Diego's STEM hub to learn about their



Holly
Smithson

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workforce strategies and priorities to tackle these inequitable trends.

Qualcomm

“At Qualcomm, from the very beginning we have fostered extremely diverse groups of people ranging from engineers to non-engineers to all kinds of different races, nationalities, and genders,” said **Vicki Mealer-Burke**, chief diversity officer of Qualcomm.



Vicki Mealer-Burke

Mealer-Burke explains this is one of the areas Qualcomm is focusing on, across countries, through innovative hiring and retention best practices.

Redesigning its college graduate strategy, Qualcomm has funded several initiatives over the years including hiring recruiters specifically targeting universities both inside and outside the U.S. with a high percentage of female enrollment within specific STEM areas.

“UC San Diego has made a long-term commitment to building diversity into their student enrollment, when we find those types of universities, we double down and make sure it is a two-way relationship,” said Mealer-Burke. “For example, I’ve had the pleasure to work with **Lisa Ordóñez**, the new dean of the **Rady School of Management** on a number of areas. Continuing to hire female deans in those areas, really shows UCSD’s understanding and commitment to producing graduates that companies like ours are going to be able to take advantage of.”

This year, the Qualcomm internship class recruited 66 engineers from UCSD, with 22% female interns out of those 66.

Truvian

Truvian is a healthcare company at the intersection of diagnostics and consumer tech and is one of the few companies that has been able to achieve true gender parity across the board.

“About 46% of our talent is female and our executive leadership team is 50-50,” said **Katherine Atkinson**, chief commercial officer of Truvian. “Our hiring efforts are naturally diverse because our leadership, management and board are very diverse.”

Atkinson said the company finds most of its candidates from employee referrals.

“When you have diversity, it removes potential biases in the sourcing and screening process,” Atkinson said. “It reduces the

San Diego saw a 50% equal share in the number of physical and life science jobs held by women for the first time in history.

probability of shortlisting those candidates. It’s been extremely helpful.”

Atkinson added that she is proud to be at the forefront of progress in her role at Truvian, noting that the company’s chair of the board is also female.

“We are helping lead the way and we’re excited to see the work that Athena is doing to help make a difference here.”

Teradata

Teradata, a Rancho Bernardo-based database technology company, witnessed an increase in their female and minority employee representation by 31% in 2019.

“At Teradata, we have individuals that are nonbinary, transgender and members of the LGBTQ community,” said **Juanita Hendrickson**, vice president of Human Resources at Teradata. “We offer a program called Women of Teradata network within our global software teams. We also expanded our active participation globally for women, allies and advocates focused on growth and development.”

Hendrickson said Teradata partners with Athena to provide its female employees professional development training and resources, including leadership forums and mentorship.

“The thought leadership and programmatic work that Athena represents for the STEM community cannot be under celebrated,” said Hendrickson. “They have been clear partners with us on this journey and strong partners helping advocate for women in the workforce. Obviously, we are not done, nobody should ever be



Juanita Hendrickson

done as we continue learning and implementing our inclusion and diversity goals.”

UC San Diego School of Engineering

“At the **Jacobs School of Engineering**, we have many opportunities for companies to engage with us in order

to support women and other students who are traditionally underrepresented in engineering and computing,” said **Christine Alvarado**, associate dean for students at UC San Diego’s Jacobs School of Engineering. “Creating majority-women recruiting spaces, such as is done at the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing, can help level this playing field. I encourage more San Diego companies to recruit at these types of venues.”

Alvarado said companies can further strengthen their efforts to diversify their workforces by getting involved before students graduate. Early internship programs with a focus on high quality mentoring are one example.

“My experiences as an educator and as a researcher point to the fact that specific actions can and should be taken in order to improve educational, recruiting and career outcomes for women in STEM. The good news is that companies have many opportunities to play active and productive roles in diversifying their workforces through thoughtful efforts before, during and after STEM students graduate from college,” said Alvarado.

She added that early internship programs could provide students with high-quality mentoring, particularly as

part of a cohort of at least two or more women at the same company, can give women students a supportive and empowering way to get started at a company and help companies secure top talent early.

Looking Forward

“It’s essential that both our region and country probe deeper on why women are so poorly represented inside STEM management. I’m particularly driven by a desire to ‘crack the code’ within our STEM community to understand why, after producing the nation’s largest number of female STEM graduates out of UCSD, that it’s not translating into greater representation in our regional workforce,” said Smithson.

Looking at the horizon, Smithson is committed to driving transparency and accountability around gender equality as more companies discover the nexus between a modern and equitable workforce and a globally competitive company that reflects the diversity of its products, consumers, and shareholders.

“We’re a global STEM hub, we can do better,” said Smithson. “To be globally competitive, we have to continue producing innovative products and services, which requires having a diverse and modern workforce. We’ve got a ways to go.”

To view full report, please visit www.athenasd.org/research-and-data. ■



Christine Alvarado

Figure 9: Women in STEM | San Diego County ¹

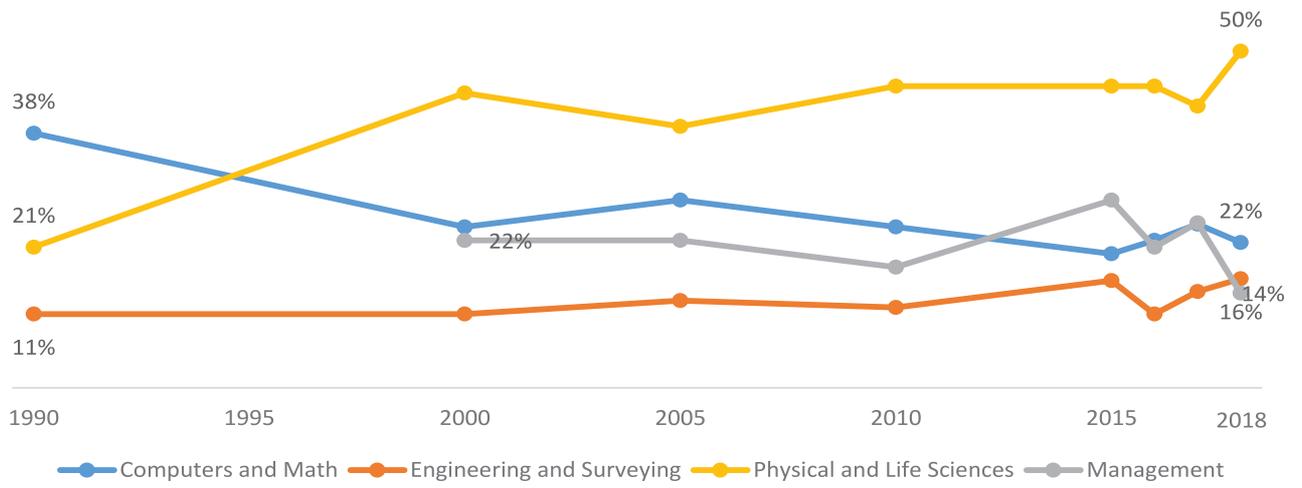


Photo courtesy of Athena.

Figure 24: STEM Bachelor’s Degrees, Percent Female | UC San Diego ⁵

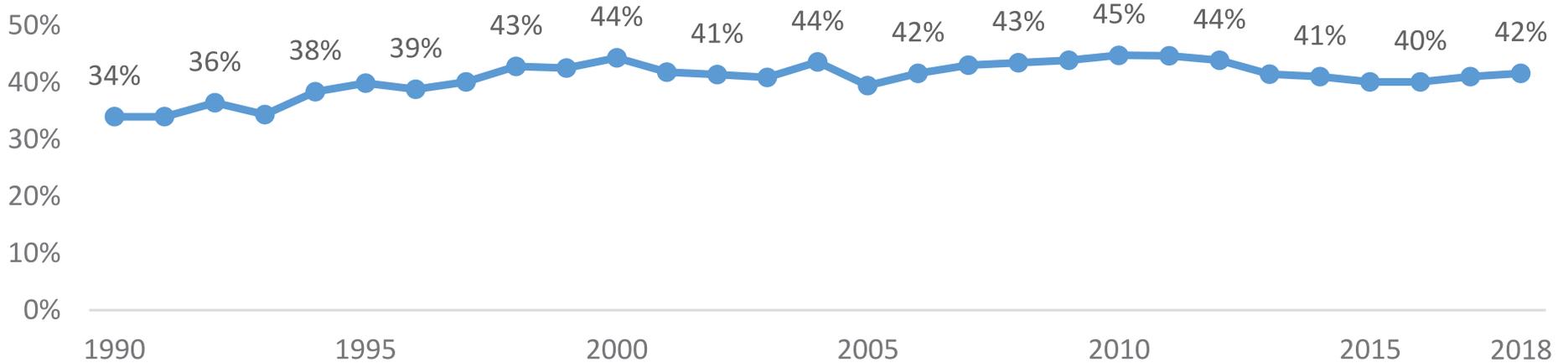


Photo courtesy of UC San Diego

Historically, UC San Diego has been graduating women in STEM at higher rates than those observed nationwide.