

## NASA Conducts Gender Discrimination Review

In June of 2008, the Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) notified President Williams that the University had been selected for a diversity review to determine compliance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Title IX is the federal law that requires all educational programs of any organization receiving federal funds to be administered in a way that does not involve sex discrimination. The review focused on the Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering (MAE) and its graduate program.

The University responded in October to an information and document request from NASA pertaining to the department, providing recruitment and admissions information, data regarding graduate program enrollment and graduation rates by gender, data regarding assistantships by gender, data regarding faculty by gender, etc. Also furnished to NASA was information about University discrimination policies and grievance procedures, diversity training, academic advising, research and classroom participation by female students, and other matters. An on-site visit by four NASA Diversity Office officials occurred in January 2009, during which they met with University officials, including MAE faculty, the MAE dean and chair, the graduate school dean, a number of students, and the University's chief diversity officer, Delois Smith, who is also the designated campus Title IX Coordinator.

Last month the University received the final review report from the NASA Diversity office. The report concluded that the University was in compliance with Title IX requirements, particularly as those requirements focused on MAE programs and activities. The report did, however, include some recommended actions by the University. It highlighted the need for ongoing Title IX training for graduate assistants, faculty, and other students. It suggested that the University, and the MAE department and the College of Engineering, continue to evaluate admissions, enrollment, retention and graduation rates, and other pertinent data to help it identify any possible barriers to equal access and opportunity for female students. One "challenge" for the University, noted in the report, is the recent drop in female enrollment rates in the MAE graduate program. Targeting potential female students, especially outside the state of Alabama; continuing to emphasize the importance of increasing the number of female MAE faculty; encouraging more proactive recruitment efforts by faculty; and expanding the use of distance learning programs were cited as ways that may enhance female participation in MAE graduate programs. The report concluded by observing that "the UAH Administration, the College of Engineering, and the MAE Department leadership, are working collaboratively to enhance EO-related efforts in a variety of innovative ways" and then noted some of these efforts specifically, characterizing them as "promising practices."

A compliance review by a federal government agency can result in findings of non-compliance and subsequent enforcement actions, some quite serious, by the agency. Fortunately, that was not the case here, due to the efforts of institutional officials to carefully follow the dictates of Title IX and implementing regulations. A compliance review can also helpfully focus on areas where additional measures would be productive and offer constructive guidance regarding new initiatives. Though the scope of this particular review was generally limited to the MAE graduate program, the report's findings and recommendations are pertinent to the entire University and its commitment to provide full educational opportunities to female students.