

**Survey of the Virginia Valian Luncheon:
Final Report**

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Background

On October 3, 2003, Dr. Virginia Valian, Professor of Psychology and Linguistics and the PI of the Hunter College ADAVANCE grant, was on the UW-Madison campus to meet with faculty and staff, present her scholarship, and provide informal consultation about gender issues. She also participated in a Women Faculty Mentoring Program (WFMP) luncheon, which included a short presentation and question and answer session.

The following report provides the results from a survey sent to 83 participants who attended the WFMP luncheon. This survey was designed to see if and how the participants were impacted by their participation and how they might use the information she presented.

We used a web-based survey package called *Zoomerang*¹ to deploy the survey. On October 15 and 17, all of the participants were sent an invitation to complete the survey. Forty-three women responded to the survey, for a 52% response rate.

Results

The first question asked the participants if they were familiar with Dr. Valian's work before attending the luncheon. Most of the participants (56%) had not heard of Dr. Valian, while 44% were familiar with her work. Of those women who had heard of Dr. Valian, most of them had read her book, *Why So Slow?* in whole or in part.

Table 1: Familiarity with Virginia Valian's research prior to the luncheon

	#	%
No (did <i>not</i> have prior knowledge of Valian's work)	24	56%
Yes (did have prior knowledge of Valian's work)	19	44%
Total	43	100%

Table 1a: Specific prior knowledge reported by respondents (n=17)

	#
Read her book, "Why So Slow?" or parts of it	11
Heard her work referenced before	5
Saw her speak before	1
Saw her online tutorial	1
Familiar with the kind of research she does, but not specifically her work	1
Total responses²	19

¹ The survey is available at: <http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?RR4WX3XXK4P0HWYV1GMGKJL7>

² The total number of respondents (17) does not coincide with the number of responses (19) because a few people identified more than one theme.

When asked to identify the reason(s) why they chose to attend the luncheon, most of the participants said they, “Wanted to hear about Dr. Valian’s work.” “Networking” was the next commonly cited reason, followed by “I was invited.”

Table 2: Reasons for attending the WISELI/WFMP luncheon with Virginia Valian³

	#	%
Hearing about Dr. Valian’s work	33	77%
Networking with other women	26	60%
I was invited	17	40%
Hoping to find solutions to problems I’m experiencing	10	23%
No reason, in particular	1	2%
Other	1	2%

The respondents were then asked to answer the question, *What did you hope to gain from attending the WISELI/WFMP luncheon?* Thirty-nine respondents chose to answer this question for a 91% response rate. The following is a summary of their comments:

By attending the Valian luncheon, respondents hoped they would be able to gather some information about Valian’s research on gender issues and the ways women are disadvantaged in academia. They had also hoped to hear Valian’s specific suggestions for women’s professional advancement in academia in general, and in some cases, on this particular campus. Many of these respondents who were looking to gain some new knowledge from the luncheon and viewed Valian as one of the “experts” in the field of gender issues and women in the workplace. In addition to information, some were also looking for personal strategies they could use to advance professionally within a gender-biased organization. Some respondents saw the luncheon more as an opportunity to feel like part of a community within the University and particularly looked forward to meeting new people. One respondent anticipated the “community” of 100 women faculty assembled in one room would be a meaningful and unique event. A few respondents came simply because they wanted to see and hear Valian speak about her studies in person. One respondent said that she left the luncheon feeling “troubled” and “disturbed” from some of the messages she heard.

The next question asked the respondents if they had *followed up on the luncheon by finding out more about Dr. Valian’s work or by viewing her web tutorials.* Most (77%) said that they had not done anything following the luncheon.

Table 3: Follow-up activities

	#	%
No (did <i>not</i> participate in any kind of follow up activities)	33	77%
Yes (followed up by finding out more about Dr. Valian’s work)	10	23%
Total	43	100%

³ Respondents were invited to check all categories that applied to them.

Twenty-one respondents explained their responses to this question:

One activity the respondents participated in following the luncheon was viewing Valian's web-based gender tutorial. They also read or intended to read *Why So Slow?* One respondent reported she attended Valian's public lecture later in the day as a continuation of the luncheon. Some respondents were already familiar with Valian's work prior to the luncheon, so they did not participate in any follow-up activities. The main reason respondents gave for not finding out more about Valian's work was they simply had no time to do so, although many who said this wanted to and intended to follow up sometime in the future.

The next question was open-ended and asked the participants to *Identify 1-2 things discussed at the luncheon that resonated with you.* Thirty-seven people responded to this question for an 86% response rate. The following is a summary of their responses:

Valian's research as well as similar research done by others had a major impact on the respondents. They mentioned the discussion of gender schemas in particular, and that these very commonly-held perceptions about gender and capability are so unfair and so subtle, yet powerful enough to create, as Valian described it, an "accumulation of disadvantage." Related to this idea, respondents also mentioned the resulting imbalance between men and women—the value associated with the different types of duties they typically perform at work, the amount of time they work and the quality of that work in relation to how much they are compensated financially, and overrating of men and underrating of women. As a result of learning about Valian's research, a few respondents commented they immediately recognized how they had been under-valuing their own work. Attending the luncheon and interacting with other women faculty helped a few respondents feel inspired by a sense of community and an ability to create change within the University. A controversial aspect of the luncheon for many respondents was Valian's suggestion that women use individual short-term strategies for advancement within a gender-biased institution (e.g., act less feminine), as opposed to typically more slowly-moving efforts to create change for women's advancement at the institution level. This notion of individual strategies for advancement was recognized as the best way to create immediate change for oneself in a slowly-changing institution, and a few respondents mentioned that they appreciated the bluntness of this message and Valian's subsequent advice.

The participants were also asked to *Identify 1-2 things discussed at the luncheon that challenged your ideas.* Twenty-three people (53%) chose to answer this question. A summary of their responses follows:

The idea of gender schemas and to whom they apply challenged some of the respondents. For example, some thought being a target of subtle discrimination only happened to young women, or only happened to women in male-dominated fields, which they found out was untrue. Valian also discussed some common strategies women could use to balance their work and personal lives, such as working part-time or choosing not to have children, and found that regardless of those efforts, women still did not fare as well as men did because of subtle gender discrimination. As discussed above, Valian provided some short-term individual strategies women could use to overcome gender schemas, which usually involved "playing down" one's femininity. These strategies challenged women's ideas about how to affect change for themselves and others, which have typically involved slow change to the culture of the institution over a long period of time. Of the women who felt their notions of

strategies for increasing gender equality were challenged by Valian’s research and suggestions for change, some commented they would try the strategies because they wanted immediate results for themselves. Others felt those strategies for change would come at the cost to the collective and would do nothing to change the culture of the institution. One respondent said she did not feel that “anything particularly unexpected or challenging was said.”

When asked to *Identify one thing they’ve done or thought about that is directly related to attending the luncheon*, thirty-four women (79%) took the opportunity to respond:

Some respondents were struck by an awareness of subtle gender bias and discrimination in the working environment. In more extreme cases of awareness, some became pessimistic about the University’s commitment to ending gender discrimination, and how this affects their job satisfaction. On a more positive note, a few respondents noted they were inspired and eager to learn more about the literature related to Valian’s research, as well as how to implement effective strategies—both individual and institution-wide—for helping themselves advance in their fields. Indeed, some of those respondents mentioned they were already utilizing strategies such as being less feminine in their interactions, volunteering less frequently for low-visibility tasks, and being less informal with colleagues. Some described very specific things, such as giving presentations to freshmen engineering students, helping a younger woman colleague with making a personal/professional decision, and trying to move out of a “chilly” department. A common activity respondents reported participating in as a direct result of attending the luncheon was talking with their colleagues about what they learned. Many described discussing issues with people in their work areas whom the respondents felt did not believe that gender discrimination existed at all.

In general, most of the participants of this survey felt that the luncheon was valuable—70% said it was either “Quite valuable” or “Very valuable.” Only one person said that it was, “Not at all valuable.”

Table 4: Overall value of the luncheon

	#	%
Not at all valuable	1	2%
Somewhat valuable	12	28%
Quite valuable	19	44%
Very valuable	11	26%
Total	43	100%

Overall, the respondents who added extra comments at the end of the survey (20; 47%) enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to attend the luncheon with Virginia Valian. Some acknowledged that Valian’s suggestions for women’s advancement put too much emphasis on individual strategies as opposed to institutional transformation. For example, one woman noted:

I was very disappointed by this luncheon because it focused on how women should fix themselves in order to better survive in academics rather than focusing on institutional change. While I have little doubt that some of her suggestions might help individual women in the short term, I felt the larger ideology would hurt most women in the long term by not challenging how a woman "should" be.

At the same time, others said that they appreciated Valian's honesty and directness. A few said it was "enjoyable and "informative" and that they "would do it again given the opportunity." Many also thanked the organizers for planning this event.