One morning back in the summer of 1975, a feisty and determined young woman, who had just graduated from the University of Nebraska, dropped by to discuss her future with a professor of history at Harvard University.

The independent-minded young woman – Londa Schiebinger, ’74 – was tired of working as a typist all day long. Having earned straight A’s as an English major at Nebraska, she knew she had a good head on her shoulders, and she was dreaming of a career as a university professor who might someday write books about the history of ideas.

Because she was living in Boston and working as a secretary at Harvard, she had decided to discuss her academic prospects with a well-known professor in the History Department.

“I sat down with the guy and I told him I was interested in working on a Ph.D. in intellectual history,” Schiebinger (pronounced: SHEE-bing-grrrr) recalls today, “and he discouraged me. He told me, ‘You know, we don’t recommend that people study (the history of ideas), because teaching jobs are hard to come by.’

“Well, that was kind of disheartening, but I thought, ‘What the hell – I’ll just apply, anyway,’ because I wasn’t going to continue typing for a living. I got in, and I wound up studying the history of women in science – with a particular emphasis on how women have been excluded from science and the consequences of that exclusion for human knowledge.

“I wasn’t surprised to discover that there was only one (academically) tenured woman in the entire Harvard History Department. There were simply very few women professors, and Harvard had no developed program in Women’s Studies, either. But I didn’t let those things stop me. I went to work on my doctorate, and I worked very hard for the next eight years to get that Ph.D.”

Against the odds, Londa Schiebinger nailed down the credentials that would enable her to enjoy a successful career as a university professor, history researcher and widely published author.

But the story doesn’t end there. Within a few years of being awarded the Ph.D., Schiebinger would publish her 1984 dissertation as the now classic book – “The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Science.” The book exploded like a bombshell on the battleground of what she calls “gender relations in science.”

Daringly original, the new book proposed a provocative thesis – the idea that women had been systematically excluded from the “scientific establishment” in Europe and the U.S., and that the
exclusion had been made to seem fair and just by a thorough-going restructuring of science and society led by a male-dominated scientific establishment.

The subtle restructuring worked like this: First, the French and American Revolutions gave birth to new democratic societies in the late 18th Century. And within the framework of these democracies, where “all men” were “by their nature equal,” scientists looked to nature to determine if women were worthy of equal rights – in society at large and also in the professions. These investigations – performed in the absence of women – showed that females had remarkably narrow skulls but wide pelvises. From this the scientists concluded that women’s small brains disqualified them from careers in science, but that their large pelvises indicated that Mother Nature intended them to birth the new citizens of the state.

In short, women belonged in the home (as loving mothers and willing housewives), rather than in the science lab ... or in the fast-growing railroad engineering department ... or in parliaments and legislatures.

These same scientific theories would be used to deprive women of the right to vote or own property in the “emerging democracies” of Europe and the United States, according to Schiebinger’s groundbreaking book.

Published – ironically enough – by the Harvard University Press in 1989, Schiebinger’s opus outlined the scientific gender-manipulation in a jacket-blurb that pulled no punches. “While many aspects of the scientific revolution are well understood,” Schiebinger argued, “what has not generally been recognized is that revolution came also from another quarter – the scientific understanding of biological sex and sexual temperament (what we today call “gender”).

“Illustrations of female skeletons of the ideal woman – with small skulls and large pelvises – portrayed female nature as a virtue in the private realm of hearth and home, but as a handicap in the world of science. At the same time, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women witnessed the erosion of their own spheres of influence. Midwifery and medical cookery were gradually subsumed into the newly professionalized medical sciences (including male-dominated medical specialties in obstetrics and gynecology).

“Scientia, the ancient female personification of science, lost ground to a newer image of the male researcher, efficient and solitary – a development that reflected a deeper intellectual shift. By the late eighteenth century, a self-reinforcing system (based in “natural law”) had emerged that rendered invisible the inequalities women suffered.”

Eureka! Within a few years of publishing “The Mind Has No Sex?,” Londa Schiebinger would become one of the most sought-after and most widely read U.S. historians in the study of how gender relations have influenced science. Today the author of half a dozen books on this and related topics, the Nebraska grad also was recently named the director of a powerhouse think tank that studies how to promote equality for women and men: the $10 million-endowed Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research at mighty Stanford University (sometimes dubbed “the Harvard of the West”).

A world traveler who lectures on gender relations in science before audiences around the globe, Schiebinger these days has reached the pinnacle of academic power – not bad for a 54-year-old writer and thinker who once fretted that she might have to spend her days typing or teaching piano.

In spite of her widely acknowledged success, however, the Stanford gender guru remains as feisty as ever on topics related to equality for women. Ask her to define the “mission” of the Gender Institute, and she doesn’t hesitate: “We want to change gender relations in this society,” she says with a smile. “Why? Because women still aren’t equal. It’s a sad thing, but in supposedly democratic societies like our own, women really aren’t equal.

“If there’s one thing we really need right now, it’s a woman president. But not a conservative woman – we need a leader who can also be active in women’s issues.”

Now a seasoned world traveler, Schiebinger’s first travel abroad experience came at the encouragement of Centennial College faculty at UNL.

‘SAVED’ BY CENTENNIAL COLLEGE

Born and raised in Lincoln, the future gender czar graduated No. 1 in her class at Southeast High School and arrived on the UNL campus as a freshman in the fall of 1970. “My brother (Rick Schiebinger, M.D., today a researcher in basic drug discovery at Eli Lilly) was going to be the scientist in our family,” Londa recalls today, “so I decided I would do humanities, and I wound up majoring in English.

“Actually, I think I would have liked to have been a scientist, but that wasn’t something that was mentioned for girls at that time. So I went into English, instead. But that didn’t work out too well, because they (the English professors) kept saying I was asking the wrong questions.

“I was interested in the social context of the novels we read, and I wanted to know how novels related to society. What attitudes and social values did a particular novel reflect? But my teachers weren’t really interested in that – they were more concerned with the internal mechanisms (of fictional narrative). So I kept getting papers back that said, ‘You’re asking the wrong questions,’ and I finally decided, okay, I’ll do something else.”

Frustrated and struggling for direction, Schiebinger – whose mother and father ran a small printing company together – says she got a lucky break during her junior year when she discovered UNL’s experimental Centennial College (now defunct). “The people who saved me at the University of Nebraska were Ted Beck and Schuyler Hauser, two professors who taught at Centennial,” she remembers. “Ted taught English and Sky taught history, and these two guys were devoted to teaching.

“Ted saved me by getting me out of the Teachers College and into Arts and Sciences, so that I would have more options open to
me. And Hauser offered the most wonderful seminars in history. He’d run us through the Renaissance in very interesting ways. And he and Ted Beck encouraged me to apply for a summer study program in London. I’d never been on a plane before . . . and suddenly there I was, walking around in Paris looking at the Monets and all the great art I’d read about.

“I went on to London for the summer program and that experience changed my life. By the time I returned to Lincoln for my senior year, I knew I wanted a professional career of some kind, and I never looked back.”

NOT ENOUGH WOMEN IN THE BOARDROOMS?

Armed with more than $7 million that she has raised from outside donors since being appointed director of the Stanford Gender Institute in 2004, Schiebinger says she’s determined to focus the nation’s attention on the fact that millions of American women are still being denied equal access to positions of executive leadership – and especially among high-tech, computer-based corporations like the ones that dominate Silicon Valley in California.

In an effort to pinpoint the continuing discrimination in that arena, Schiebinger’s institute – which includes 160 faculty-member participants from different Stanford University academic departments and a small staff of full-time employees – recently launched a major study of hiring and promotion trends in Silicon Valley. She says she was “concerned to learn that the overall percentage of women who comprise the IT workforce is actually on the decline” and fell from 41 percent in 1996 to only 32 percent in 2004.

Even worse, says Schiebinger, is the continuing under-representation of women in the ranks of American IT managers (now less than 20 percent) and in the corporate boardrooms of the major high-tech U.S. firms (only nine percent).

“In this study, we’re interested in learning how companies can be more successful in promoting women engineers and computer scientists. We’re also interested in how more women in leadership can make these companies more competitive and responsive to their markets.”

For the tireless gender researcher, who’s won numerous awards and prizes over the years for books such as “Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science” (Beacon Press, 1993), “Has Feminism Changed Science?” (Harvard University Press, 1999), and “Plants and Empire” (Harvard University Press, 2004), the root-cause of the kind of job discrimination she’s studying in Silicon Valley is “the extremely subtle manipulation of public attitudes and values that has been practiced by scientists and industrial managers – men and often also women – through many generations.

“Gender discrimination is actually very complicated,” she said during a recent interview in her office at the Stanford History Department. “It’s not about sheer muscle – not at all. And the reason it’s so hard to get rid of is that it’s so subtle.”

Although Schiebinger readily admits that she faces an uphill battle in her campaign to overcome this subtle discrimination, many of her Stanford colleagues are quick to point out that she’s equipped with the gritty determination – along with the solid personal leadership skills – that will be required to turn the tide against gender bias.

“What’s in a Name? Plenty.

Ask Londa Schiebinger to tell you about her personal life, and she’ll surprise you by describing her role as a working mom with two teen-aged sons – a role in which she spends lots of time “teaching them about music and life, encouraging them to follow their passions, and generally enjoying them.”

Partnered for the past 25 years with Professor Robert Proctor – also a well-known Stanford historian of science – Schiebinger jokes that although her family life sounds pretty typical at first (all four members are avid skiers and often enjoy the slopes at nearby Lake Tahoe), her family does differ from most others in one important way.

“When we decided to have children,” she explains, “we started by talking everything over. We agreed that we would have two children, and no more . . . and that they would each have one of our names. So our older son (now 17) is named Geoffrey Schiebinger, and our younger son (now 14) is named Jonathan Proctor. In other words, we devised a system (for the sake of gender equality) that has caused endless problems with doctors and dentists and schools – but it’s something we’re very pleased with.”

Describing her life today as a teacher, researcher, institute director, worldwide lecturer and busy parent, Londa Schiebinger says she actually relishes the daily struggle involved in working to protect the rights of women everywhere. “In some ways, the challenge we face here at the Institute is quite simple,” she says with a quiet smile of determination. “We want women to have equal opportunity, in any field that they’d like to enter.”

Schiebinger lectures around the globe, focusing on the underrepresentation of women in scientific leadership positions.
FAMOUS NEBRASKA ALUMNAE IN SCIENCE

It’s a fact: Although they don’t always get the credit they deserve, women scientists have frequently played an important role in the development of today’s science-based, high-tech world.

Where would modern medicine be, for example, without the x-ray technology that flowed from the discovery of radium by that famed French chemist, Marie Curie (1867-1934) – a relentless investigator who eventually won two Nobel Prizes for her cutting-edge work in science?

And how about the unheralded but enormously influential Williamina Fleming? After inventing a universal system for classifying stars on the basis of the light-patterns they project, this little-known American astronomer (1857-1911) went on to discover 59 different nebulae and hundreds of stars.

Nebraska has had its fair share of women scientists as well, particularly in medicine. Here’s a quick look at some of our more famous scientific alumnas:

Rosa Bouton, 1893
Bouton was the first woman to receive a graduate degree in chemistry west of the Mississippi and became the fourth faculty member in the University of Nebraska’s chemistry department. Her interests in training women in the scientific method led her to found the School of Domestic Science, which ultimately became the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences. She was one of the first two women members (the other was NU faculty member Rachel Lloyd) of the American Chemical Society.

Edith Schwartz Clements, 1898, 1904
Edith and her husband Frederic E. Clements, both noted botanists and ecologists, conducted a systematic study of plant succession (the development of vegetation) in thousands of square miles in the Colorado Rockies. In 1903, the flower Clementsia rhodantha (“Clements’ rose flower”), a stonecrop, was named in honor of Frederic and Edith Clements.

Gladys Rowena Henry Dick, 1900
A microbiologist and physician, Dick was co-discoverer of the antitoxin for scarlet fever in 1924 and a founder of the first professional organization for the adoption of children in the United States in 1918.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth, 1906
Hollingworth was the first woman to scientifically research and challenge the “armchair dogmas” which alleged the inferiority of women. She found no evidence that sex differences limited women’s intellectual and career abilities, attributing any such differences to sociological limitations. Noted for being the founder of education for gifted children, she established the first school for “fast learners” — Speyer School in New York City, and wrote the first major text on adolescent psychology and educating the gifted.

Elizabeth Mason Hohl, 1915, 1926
In 1944 Hohl, a physician, founded the Cancer Prevention Society in California (now known as the Elizabeth Center for Cancer Detection in her honor) and served as its chief of staff. Named Woman of the Year in Medicine by the Los Angeles Times in 1956, she was the founder and president of many organizations relating to medicine.

Ruth Mandeville Leverton, 1928
Co-recipient of the Borden Award in 1942 and 1953 for outstanding research in applied nutrition, Leverton was involved in such vital efforts as food rationing and distribution during war, the development and evolution of the Recommended Dietary Allowances, the decision to fortify grains with nutrients, and the organization of domestic and foreign food assistance programs.

Nancy Coover Andreasen, 1958, 1963
Recipient of the prestigious National Medal of Science in 2000, Andreasen is internationally recognized for her groundbreaking integrative studies of mind, brain and behavior. As Andrew Woods Chair of Psychiatry and director of the Mental Health Research Center at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, she has joined behavioral science with the technologies of neuroscience and neuro-imaging in order to understand mental processes such as memory and creativity, and mental illnesses such as schizophrenia.

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