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Business

Space scientist scores another first as WPI's new chief

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 22, 2014

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WPI named Laurie Leshin its first female president.

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Laurie Leshin has helped send robots to Mars, overseen NASA's largest science center, commanded research on human space exploration, and even has a piece of the solar system named after her.

The 48-year-old geochemist and space scientist's next mission: leading Worcester Polytechnic Institute as the first woman president in its 149-year history.

"My favorite thing in the world is learning new things and meeting new people. It's like candy to me," said Leshin, who is currently a dean at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York. Leshin said she hopes to "turn up the volume" on the "many things WPI already has going for it."

A self-described "space nerd," Leshin shares a birthday with astronaut Neil Armstrong and is a member of the team that launched the Mars Curiosity rover mission.

Once asked by an interviewer about her propensity for referring to Curiosity as a "she," Leshin said it was

“because she’s smart and good-looking.”

Though WPI is small in size, its stature has been growing recently, thanks in part to its research in the booming robotics field.

Its ties to NASA include hosting a major robotics contest for student teams in conjunction with the space agency.

And in December, WPI researchers finished seventh in a prestigious robot throwdown run by the Pentagon’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency that featured teams running a 330-pound humanoid robot through emergency rescue situations.

The WPI team finished ahead of teams from NASA’s own Johnson Space Center and the Advanced Technology Laboratories of space giant Lockheed Martin.

Leshin is scheduled to officially take over as WPI’s 16th president in July, in time for the start of the school’s next academic year.

School officials said she was the “unanimous first choice” of university trustees, who spent six months sifting among 200 candidates for the position. She joined Rensselaer in 2011.

She replaces Dennis D. Berkey who stepped down in May after leading WPI for nine years.

Her prodigious scientific pedigree includes several senior-level administrative positions at NASA, including helping to oversee the agency’s human spaceflight activities.

She also helped run the Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland, a massive facility that conducts research on space and builds spacecraft, instruments, and new technology.

The Goddard center is named after Robert Hutchings Goddard, a WPI alumnus who built and launched the world’s first liquid-fueled rocket from a farm in Auburn, Mass., in 1926.

Among Leshin’s many awards and honors is something few others are likely to duplicate: She has a patch of outer space with her name on it. “4922 Leshin” is a several-mile long strip of matter in the so-called main belt of asteroids that are roughly located between the planets Mars and Jupiter.

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‘She is an academic who understands the role of — and the potential for — academia in the larger world.’

The International Astronomical Union named the asteroid in recognition of her contributions to planetary science.

Leshin said she first discovered her love for space at age 10 when she read a copy of Time magazine on her mother's kitchen table in her hometown of Tempe, Ariz. The magazine showed pictures of the surface of Mars taken by NASA spacecraft in the Viking program.

"It looked a lot like the desert landscape around where I grew up," she recalled.

Leshin earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Arizona State University in 1987 before later earning a master's and a doctorate in geochemistry from California Institute of Technology.

She is married to astrophysicist and former NASA official Jon Morse. And her scientific specialty sounds other-worldly — cosmochemistry; according to her biography, while at NASA, she was "primarily interested in deciphering the record of water on objects in our solar system."

"Laurie Leshin is impressive by any measure," said the chairman of WPI's trustees, Warner Fletcher. "She is an academic who understands the role of — and the potential for — academia in the larger world. She is well positioned to take WPI to an even higher level of excellence and prominence."

WPI is small in comparison to engineering powerhouses such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford University — about 4,000 undergraduates and some 1,900 full- and part-time graduate students.

But it has been rising in prominence.

In 2009, NASA awarded a WPI team \$500,000 for its winning entry in a contest to build a robot that could move lunar soil.

WPI dominated the contest by building "Moonraker 2.0," a robot that moved about 960 pounds of dirt within 30 minutes.

And its showing in the DARPA robot challenge in December was good enough to put WPI in the finals of the competition, battling it out with MIT and a prestigious team of Japanese scientists for a \$2 million prize.

Leshin cited the "high quality" WPI faculty and students and the school's "distinct interdisciplinary project-based approach to learning."

She said the project-based curriculum at WPI reminds her of how NASA operates

An [avid Twitter user](#), Leshin uses social media to communicate with students, faculty, and others in her field. On Tuesday, she received dozens of messages on Twitter offering congratulations.

“I’m up 1,000 followers today,” Leshin said, laughing. “It’s amazing.”

Michael B. Farrell of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. For more coverage of area colleges and universities, visit boston.com/yourcampus.

Correction: An earlier version of this story gave imprecise descriptions of Laurie Leshi’s previous positions.

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