

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES RELATED TO RETENTION PROGRAMS AND OUR WORK IN THE OFFICE OF WOMEN'S PROGRAMS

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Women in Engineering and Science programs are often charged with the responsibility of developing programs to retain women students. It has been our experience that one effective approach to retention is to involve students in the implementation of Women in Engineering and Science Programs. We have, through our Office of Women's Programs been offered the opportunity to get involved in the Stevens pre-college and undergraduate Women in Engineering and Science programs in a variety of ways. Our participation has helped to reaffirm our career decisions. It has also contributed to developing a number of skills that will benefit us as a professional. These include leadership skills, team building skills, communication skills and organizational skills.

Each summer, the Stevens Office of Women's Programs (OWP) offers a program for high school sophomores and juniors called Exploring Career Options in Engineering and Science (ECOES). This program provides an opportunity for participants to explore various aspects of engineering and science related careers, while at the same time giving many of them their first exposure to college life. The ECOES participants have the opportunity to meet women in the fields of their interests and are given the chance to travel to several industries and corporations. This aspect of ECOES provides a very realistic view of life after college. Elements such as time management, teamwork, effective utilization of resources, and the presentation of technical information are also emphasized. ECOES provides a good opportunity for the students to determine where their interests lie, and to organize their priorities accordingly. The experiences at ECOES can last a lifetime.

As Stevens undergraduates, we applied, were interviewed and then hired as Resident Assistants for the ECOES program. We lived in the dormitory with 40 high school students from all over the country. Our job as a Resident Assistant to 10 students was a multifaceted one, including such responsibilities as counselor, teacher, role model, supervisor and friend. Conflict resolution was a particularly important part of being an ECOES Resident Assistant. Students encountered the problems that can result from working in a team and also from living with a roommate for the first time. It was our job to help resolve these problems expediently. Another issue that arose was how to become friends with the participants and yet, still remain a respected figure of authority. This was achieved by spending leisure time with participants and becoming friends and assisting them with academic projects. Yet, when it was time for the curfew to be enforced, we had to make sure that students understood that it was our responsibility to make sure that they returned promptly to their rooms and obeyed the other policies and procedures of the program.

vision that once you reach college nothing can stop you; you are full of enthusiasm, hold great plans for the future, have lots of fresh ideas and an abundance of confidence! However, once the reality of the heavy workload and constant feelings of fatigue sets in during college, it becomes harder and harder to truly look at the future through such wide and hopeful eyes. It is at this point during college that many women find themselves needing more words of encouragement and support. Exposure to inspirational role models and mentors during the ECOES program helped us strengthen or even regain our sense confidence, direction and enthusiasm.

The ECOES program also gave us the opportunity to learn more about careers in engineering and science that we are already studying. Plant trips and speakers were a good source of new knowledge and clarification of prior knowledge. Having a broader and more informed technical background enabled us to have a greater appreciation and understanding of much of the information being presented during these trips and sessions. Another important aspect of the Resident Assistant's job however, is recognizing that many of these young women in high school will look to you as a role model. Knowing this, the Resident Assistants took this chance to have a positive influence on these young women. At the end of the program many participants approached us with words of gratitude and positive outlooks. Knowing that we had made a lasting impact on these promising and intelligent young women was a very satisfying feeling. Being an ECOES Resident Assistant was a very enjoyable and rewarding experience in many ways. Not only were new friendships formed, but many lifelong lessons were learned. ECOES enhanced the organizational skills and time management of all parties involved, along with providing an opportunity to share personal experience and knowledge to help benefit others who wish to follow your lead.

One of the most recent developments of the Office of Women's Programs is the Women's Seminar Series. This is a project supervised by the OWP but organized by a group of undergraduate students dedicated to helping others cope with the problems and trials associated with college life. We schedule monthly seminars on topics which have included Nutrition, Exercise and Relaxation; Feminine Health and Hygiene; Career and Academic Assertiveness; and Developing Communication Skills. As this project is being led by a student programming committee, we have learned how to develop leadership skills, motivate fellow students and organize speakers and topics appropriate to current student needs and interests. Since we have attempted to schedule speakers who are engineers and scientists, the students who attend the seminars have an opportunity to make important contacts with people in the workplace. The most important accomplishment of this program, however, has been the expanded support system offered by the leaders and participants of the seminars.

Another example of involving students in the Stevens Women in Engineering and Science programs is the quarterly newsletter, Network News. The articles presented address many needs of the students, both male and female and the articles in the Student Edition are written by Stevens students. While working to support the students as a whole, we have learned how to work as a team, meet deadlines and effectively express our ideas through writing.

We have also been able to improve our public speaking abilities and improve the quality of our verbal communication by serving as speakers during other OWP programs targeted at students in 7th-12th grade. Speaking on a panel can be a very rewarding experience because it is easy to determine whether or not you have generated the audience's interest. If students begin to ask questions then you know you were successful and you automatically feel more confident in your speaking ability. We have also developed an ability to adapt to the different interests of

audiences. Speaking on a panel builds confidence and consequently, each successive time we feel more comfortable and qualified in addressing groups of people.

The purpose of the Office of Women's Programs is to promote Women In Engineering programs, encourage young women to consider careers in a technical field and to provide support for women already pursuing or even working in those fields. Working in the office of Women's Programs has been a very valuable experience for many reasons. Primarily, it has been a generous source of personal support, understanding and encouragement, all of which are especially important for any student in a technical school. Another important benefit is that with such efforts, it has been much easier to stay abreast of new developments and programs related to women's issues. Having an opportunity to speak with women who have successfully found a balance between family and career is very inspirational. In the past, women have searched for a strong female role models to admire and from whom to learn. Today however, we have a wide network of speakers primarily for our high school programs, all of whom are very successful, enthusiastic and exceptional role models. We have also been able to recognize, through our work in at OWP, the importance of trust and dependability in the workplace. This is a lesson that will be carried on in our careers after college.

Ideally, all female students should feel as comfortable and welcome in the Office of Women's Programs as those of us who work here. Unfortunately, many women do not take advantage of these valuable resources and must rely solely on peer support. This is why we have tried to promote more programs and organizations which encourage current students to establish a network of support among themselves. Through our involvement in the initiation and application of these programs we have had the chance to build our own personal character, enlarge our network of support and contacts, and learn many lessons all of which will enable us to become successful in the professional world.

