

## DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE

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The purpose of this paper is to speak a little about my involvement in the Women in Engineering Initiative at the University of Washington and to relate some of my personal experiences with the program and how I feel it has given me invaluable skills for the future.

Currently at the University of Washington I am a senior in Mechanical Engineering and will be graduating with my BS degree in a few weeks. I have been involved with Women in Engineering at the University of Washington since my freshman year in 1988 and then actually became employed with WIE spring quarter of my sophomore year. My main responsibilities over the last two or so years have been Newsletter Editor for both WIE PRESS and WEPANEWS, as well as being responsible for the design of several other documents. In addition to being the Newsletter Editor, I am also the International Host for foreign women participating in the WIE International Exchange Program with Ecole Polytechnique Feminine. I was fortunate to have been able to participate in this program in 1990.

I would like to now explain a little about the environment and structure of the WIE Initiative at the University of Washington. Our current staff is made up of a total of 22 people. We have 4 full-time staff which include the Director, Dr. Suzanne G. Brainard, the Assistant Director, the Secretary, and the Research Associate. The remainder of the staff is made of people like me, engineering students, graduate and undergraduate, who are either in charge of specific programs, or who have logistical roles in the office. WIE at the University of Washington has 16 to 18 programs and services which are offered currently. Each of the programs is chaired by 1 to 2 students on the staff. Students who work for WIE agree to work for at least one year, but most work at least two years or even stay on staff the entire time of their college career. The programs receive support from other staff members, such as myself, for anything from flyers advertising an event, to obtaining specific information from the data base. All of the programs run under the WIE philosophy which was developed by students at the beginning of the UW WIE program back in 1988. *"An academic and social climate in engineering, equally conducive and encouraging to male and female students, will foster increased interests and sustained*

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*desires to pursue engineering careers."*

The experience I have gained from being involved with WIE at the University of Washington has been invaluable to me. I have been very fortunate to be a part of WIE and have received endless benefits. I have selected only a few of these benefits to share which I feel have been most important to me and will be most beneficial to me in the future.

By working at WIE I have learned so much on how an organization is actually run. All of the students that work for WIE have a hand in its day to day operation, and I think we are all aware of the need for excellent communication and coordination among us to make WIE an effective program. It has always been essential that we are all able to work together on projects and know clearly where each of our responsibilities lay within the organization. Being Newsletter Editor, I have had to work under deadlines, and so it has been necessary for me to be able to coordinate with the chairs of the programs, the director and assistant director, and others to obtain their articles for WIE PRESS on time. Beyond working with those within WIE itself, I have had to coordinate with other campus services, such as Publication Services, on a regular basis. Again this has taught me how to work with others, but also how to handle the bureaucracy that is present at such a large institution such as the University of Washington.

From a practical standpoint I have gained many very beneficial skills from having been a part of the WIE program. I have had several opportunities to prepare and give presentations. I have had many opportunities to write and have become more concise in my writing style. In working on the newsletters I have learned time management, how to delegate work to others, and how to train a replacement. In addition, I have had the opportunity to teach younger students through MESA (Mathematics, Science and Engineering Achievement) at the junior high level in using computers, as well as helping them on science labs and projects.

Another very important thing that I have learned from working at WIE is a greater appreciation for mutual understanding and respect in the workplace. We have a very diverse group, both in background and ethnicity, and it is vital that we all accept each other and learn to co-exist in our work environment. I think also in any organization people may from time to time feel they have not been properly acknowledged for a job well done. However, I have learned by working with my peers on WIE projects that it is most important that everyone learn to share the limelight and take pride in what they have achieved as a whole. I feel that what the group has accomplished together can be even more satisfying than what I have accomplished alone. I think anyone who visited the WIE Initiative would sense a very strong feeling of camaraderie and respect for each other among the staff.

I think what I am most thankful for after having worked at WIE for these last couple of years is how my confidence and my sense of leadership have improved from when I was a freshman student. My daily experiences at WIE have provided me with countless opportunities to overcome some of my fears of public speaking and of dealing with people or situations with which I

am unfamiliar. On a daily basis the opportunities to speak out in front of others, for example in the form of staff meetings, are available. I think the director of our program would agree with me that I was quite timid when I first came to the program. I can say without a doubt though that I no longer have any fear about having to express my opinion to or ask something of people that I do not know very well. It is certainly important to have the ability to call on people who you have possibly never met when in the workplace. I know now that I have that ability to do this and no longer have any trepidation.

Working at a WIE Initiative necessarily prepares you for some of the biases that we will encounter in the workplace being women engineers. This is an issue that arises time and time again, and I am glad for the fact that I have had the chance to hear it. Recently I had an interview where the fact that women were not yet completely accepted as engineers became very clear to me. It was very comforting to be able to discuss this with my co-workers at WIE afterward for support. It will truly be beneficial to me to know beforehand what to expect from my future co-workers in engineering, good or bad. I think that working at WIE has enlightened me on certain issues that I didn't realize existed. Now I believe I will better handle a situation where my competence as an engineer is questioned because of the fact I am a woman.

This brings me to my last topic. I think the main reason for my confidence in going into the next phase of my life, that is finding my first job and starting my career as an engineer, is the fact that I have been fortunate enough to have been surrounded by excellent role-models. Our program is in constant contact with industry which allows me to meet many women engineers at different levels of experience. These women have proven to me that I have made the right choice for myself and that despite the barriers that still exist for women in this field, it is not impossible to have a very successful career. I have already sensed that I have acted as somewhat of a role-model for younger students around me as someone who has made it through the Mechanical Engineering Department. I now really look forward to being the role-model in a professional sense to women still in school wondering if they have done the right thing in choosing engineering as a career. It will give me immense pleasure to be able to give back the knowledge I have gained by having worked at WIE, and the knowledge I have gained from being in contact with professional women engineers over these last couple of years.

