

Reflections on PLEN

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This semester, I had the wonderful opportunity to attend a PLEN seminar, this last one I attended was specifically focused on STEM policy. Taking place over 4 days, I and about 25-30 other young women listened to, engaged with, and learned from a number of influential women in both the public and private sectors. Each guest speaker had their own unique journey—both professionally and personally— through which they gave us their tips and tricks, opportunities for work or research, and shared their hardships, and shared their successes. Each of the speakers were in a line of work somehow related to the STEM fields and STEM policy, however one of the central guiding themes throughout the seminar was to show how you don't need to come from a technical, science background in order to work in and contribute to STEM policy and sectors.

The diversity of STEM policy was reflected in the speakers, their careers, and in the participating students. As a person of color, and as many of the attending students were people of color, it was not only inspiring, but necessary to see and learn from strong women who have been historically disenfranchised and underrepresented. As a young mixed-raced woman on the front steps of the workforce, having all the wonderful speakers as well as the PLEN organization as support and as a resource is something I am so grateful for. Another guiding theme throughout the seminar was the importance and value of organizations such as PLEN that work to combat the stereotypical gender, sex, and cultural norms that act as barriers to women who are simply looking to have the same opportunities as our male counterparts. The importance of sharing, lifting, and helping one another as women was something greatly celebrated at this seminar, and something that was hopeful, encouraging, and wonderful to experience.

Finally, I would like to touch on what the PLEN seminar taught me specifically and what I gained from the experience. Foremost, the seminar taught me confidence, and it taught me to see that my feminine/female qualities are my strongest assets, not my hindrances. It was so empowering to be surrounded by women who have too been told “you’re too loud” or “you’re too bossy” and rather than letting that set them back, it propelled them forward. It also taught me that my professional career does not need to adhere to the beaten path. Each of these women highlighted their beginnings and work in other sectors or disciplines, emphasizing that multidisciplinary, perhaps tangential, diverse experiences can do nothing but help you, and foster your lifelong learning. I had attended the seminar with the intention of learning about environmental policy but left with a breadth of knowledge about so many other things: security, data, energy, transportation, healthcare, or finances. I am now thinking about career paths that I had not before even believed to be an option for me. Lastly, the seminar taught me about collaboration and inclusion. Each of the speakers emphasized the importance of working together to support each other, and the importance of support systems and organizations that work to bring our voices to the forefront. Getting to know my fellow student participants and learning about their experiences from all over the country and the world highlighted the strength of diversity, relationships, and working together. I am so thankful for the opportunity, and I am so appreciative of the knowledge and friendships from this seminar that I know I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

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