

PLEN: Women in STEM Policy

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Meet Lauren Bartels! She majors in chemical engineering and is interested in environmental/sustainability science-policy work. She recently attended Public Leadership Education Network (PLEN)'s Women in STEM Policy seminar.

Describe yourself and why you wanted to attend the PLEN conference:

Ever since I was young, I knew I was destined to pursue a degree rooted in science. As I grew older, I began to realize the excitement I felt when tasked with any sort of challenge, so I looked for a degree which would serve to strengthen my critical-thinking skills. After much research, I declared a chemical engineering major and have not looked back.

Despite my love for engineering, I realized I wanted to utilize my degree beyond the typical engineering career paths. A previous summer internship in Washington, D.C. had introduced me to the world of science-policy, and I became eager to learn more about the intersection of these fields. I saw the Women in STEM Policy PLEN conference as a means for both broadening my knowledge of science-policy careers and introducing me to many respected women in the field.

What were your favorite parts of the conference?

I honestly enjoyed every aspect of the conference, as I learned so much more than I could have anticipated. However, one of my favorite parts was the fact I was constantly surrounded by powerful women who shared my passion for science-policy. Not only were all of the speakers and panelists renowned in their respective areas of expertise, but the other students attending the conference were extremely inspirational. Although the importance of science-driven policy cannot be overemphasized, the opportunities for scientists to influence politics often goes unaddressed. Scientists are severely underrepresented in influential government positions, so I was encouraged by the enthusiasm demonstrated by my peers.

Highlight a speaker or a job site you visited:

Although I am intrigued by all science-related policies, my particular interests revolve around environmental policies. One afternoon during the conference, we were split into small groups and sent to visit the location of an organization focused on a particular policy issue. My group was sent to the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), which is an environmental advocacy group driven by scientific research. We were able to meet a variety of employees in their D.C. office in an informal atmosphere, where they educated us on the work of the EDF and answered any questions we had about the organization or science-policy in general. I gained valuable knowledge from this site visit, and the trip only strengthened my interest in environmental policy.

Tell us what you learned that you hope to never forget:

Although each of the panels throughout the seminar focused on a different topic, one question was repeatedly asked: how did you reach the career you hold today? Regardless of the specific career field, all answers emphasized the idea of “planned luck.” An individual must be active in pursuing diverse opportunities; however, one cannot predict where each opportunity will lead. I learned a career in science-policy does not result from particular choices throughout one’s education and early career but rather one’s eagerness to learn and desire to improve.

Why should other students attend a PLEN conference?

Women in STEM Policy was the specific PLEN conference I attended, but PLEN hosts numerous other conferences to prepare women for leadership positions in the public policy arena. Even if you are unsure you are interested in public policy, maintaining knowledge of the political process benefits many aspects of your life and enhances your ability to think critically about a variety of issues. Furthermore, networking is key, and PLEN allows you to meet many professionals and other students with extremely diverse backgrounds. No one will leave PLEN without learning something new and creating fond memories!

Does this sound like something you might be interested in? Tulane undergraduate students can apply to NCI for funding to attend PLEN conferences. Email Betsy Lopez at elopez@tulane.edu for more information.

Responses have been lightly edited for length and clarity.