

# PLEN: Women in STEM Policy

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Meet Carolyn! She attended the Public Leadership Education Network (PLEN) Women in STEM Policy conference, thanks to a grant from NCI. She's a computer science and finance major with an interest in new technologies.

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

My interest in STEM was deeply rooted before I selected the major three years ago. Since my family's first computer when I was six years old, the combination of human

intelligence and machines had been fascinating to me. My strength in analytical and mathematical abilities was also prominent throughout elementary school and high school. I love the quantitative world since I used my first microscope to observe oral mucosal epithelial cells in second grade. In high school, I was initially accepted into the chemistry competition class and learned college chemistry and calculus in advance.

At my introductory computer science class at Tulane during my first semester, I met my life-long mentor, who consistently motivated me to pursue my interests within and beyond the computer science major. Studying computer science at Tulane considerably improved my logical thinking capabilities apart from coding skills. I was a research assistant for the Business School, where I designed and coded a Python program for business behavioral research through the project life cycle. Currently, I am working on a joint research project by both the Computer Science Department and the Medical School to research virtual reality devices for medical purposes. I was also fortunate enough to be selected to attend the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing both last year and this year, which led me to dive deeper into the realm of STEM. I had never imagined how empowering it was to be under the same roof with 16,000 other women, including students, scholars, and professionals. I still clearly recall these female leaders' inspiring speeches on female leadership.

I loved the vast possibilities the future has in store with technology breakthroughs, which resonates with the core of STEM to solve challenges with creativity. I loved the idea of empowering women in an industry with one of the greatest gender gaps. I loved the conversations I had embarked and would embark on with intellectuals from places around the world. Each of these previous STEM experiences of mine stimulated my intellectual development to an unprecedented level. I knew this conference would be the next and I was right.

What were your favorite parts of the conference?

My favorite parts of the conference were these once-in-a-lifetime experiences to visit the National Institute of Health, the Capitol building, the Pentagon, and NASA headquarters, let alone all those amazing speakers and panelists who came from all over the spectrum talking about their careers and passions. Washington, DC was the perfect place to immerse ourselves with a sense of politics and to learn what policy making means in the STEM field. As students, we also had the benefit of featured career advice and networking events.

Highlight a speaker or a site you visited:

I chose NASA headquarters as my site visit because I am passionate about space and anything related to space. NASA is the supreme palace that studies all about the black holes, space travels, dark matter, and dark energy. I was fortunate enough to visit their headquarters during the workshop and witness the brains behind all their research centers nationwide. The panelists who were life-long scientists inspired all of the students present.

Detail what you learned that you hope to never forget:

One thing I learned, almost from every speaker and panelist with different backgrounds, is that the traditional concept of a clear, specific “career path” is more often a “career jungle jam” in reality. Every college student must have experienced, or is going to experience, the stress and anxiety of job seeking. And this stress to immediately determine our entire life’s mission and meaning of existence may evolve throughout our lives. I learned that worrying and stressing out had no use whatsoever. Instead, we should focus on the present and make the best choice for ourselves right here, right now.

Why should other students attend a PLEN conference?

The PLEN conferences provide a wonderful opportunity to step outside your comfort zones and hear from people working at the top levels of their industries, and they also expose students to a much broader world of potential career choices. Furthermore, you could hear from other distinguished women who have experienced all the pitfalls, mistakes, inequalities, and sponsorships in their lives, which will absolutely be a valuable lesson. Additionally, the site visits and locations in each day of the conference will surely be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for many.