Promoting equality through education

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A primary goal for the American Association of University Women is to encourage college women to take up leadership roles and STEM careers by providing training and support workshops and programmes. Here, Kate Farrar explains how these activities are securing equality within the workforce.
Throughout your career you have been an advocate for women and girls’ leadership. Can you elaborate on the path that led you to become Vice President of Campus Leadership Programs at the American Association of University Women (AAUW)?

I joined AAUW almost seven years ago, and was attracted to working for the organisation through one of its core programmes called the National Conference for College Women Student Leaders – the only conference in the US that brings together female college leaders from all over the country. Remarkably, I attended this conference when I was in college, and it was extremely inspiring. The idea of returning to an organisation and working on the same conference that made such an impact on my life was one of the core reasons I decided to work at AAUW.

AAUW has more than 800 college and university partner members with thousands of student members

Since I started, we have tripled our programmes and quadrupled our college/university student members. At AAUW, we’ve reinvested more resources into building up the confidence and skills of college women. Specific to STEM, we’ve started two national programmes for girls to ensure that middle school girls are considering STEM careers as a pathway. By focusing our STEM work on college-age and younger women and girls, AAUW has grown our impact for the next generation of leaders and STEM professionals.

What is the overarching mission and vision of AAUW?

AAUW is a remarkable organisation because our mission is tied to advancing equality for women and girls. The work we do covers advocacy, education, philanthropy and research, and we try to achieve our goal from all these angles. Since our founding in 1881, we have been working in this manner to empower tens of thousands of women decade after decade. We aim to face this inequality head-on, not only in STEM professions, but in a wide range of issues, from problems with campus sexual assault to inequality in social security.

We will continue to fight for our mission. Our founders, who were some of the first women to pursue higher education, would be astounded at the US today, which has more women on campuses and graduating than ever before; however, they would also be disturbed that we have so few women in leadership positions. I’m sure that they would be proud that we’re continuing to fight the persisting inequalities.

AAUW has a strong history of worldwide collaboration. How has AAUW gone global?

There are many examples I can cite that show our global reach. Since the 1800s, we have been giving graduate fellowships to women to pursue higher education, and we are now the largest funder of postgraduate education for women in the world. Many of our fellowships are for women who come to the US to study, and we also offer grants when they return to their country to continue their education.

Another role that we play is through our consultative status at the UN; we seek to use our resources, research and experience to advocate for women internationally. We have proponents around the globe, and we also have several college and university partners worldwide who believe in our mission and want to expose their students to our organisation’s offerings.

What have been the key takeaway messages from AAUW’s upcoming research report, Solving the Equation: Women in Engineering and Computing?

This report is focused on how many women are working in engineering and computing, and how we can increase their representation in the workforce. These skills are paramount to solving a multitude of problems the world is facing. When women aren’t represented in these areas, we are cutting our potential workforce in half. Uniquely, the report offers recommendations for specific audiences, such as policy makers, universities and industry. The reason we focused on STEM is that we are not making enough progress in this area and this is where we need to pinpoint concerns.

Can you discuss AAUW’s Tech Trek programme?

Tech Trek is a week-long science and mathematics camp for girls; it was set up through a California AAUW branch member in 1998. In the past two years an AAUW branch member has taken this programme nationally. This year there will be 21 camps.

TRACKING TECH TREK TRIUMPHS

Recently, AAUW completed a survey of the Tech Trek programme:

- 73 per cent of the respondents stated that Tech Trek introduced them to STEM college majors of which they were previously unaware
- Tech Trek alumni are pursuing higher maths and science classes after the programme, many of which are precursors to earning academic credit for courses when they transfer into university
- 77 per cent of alumni completed pre-calculus mathematics, beating the national average of 37 per cent

According to Kate Farrar, Tech Trek can have a considerable lasting effect on participants: “Not only are participants being exposed and transformed in how they’re perceiving STEM, but they’re also pursuing the pathways that will set them up to take these subjects in college”.

www.internationalinnovation.com
There are several reasons why these camps give a high impact experience for girls. They:

- Provide an opportunity to interact with women in STEM as role models
- Offer different workshops and core classes
- Spark awareness of career opportunities available
- Ensure that girls are empowered to see beyond the stereotypes and biases that they might be facing and not aware of in their own lives

Likewise, can you elaborate on the Tech Savvy Programme?

A day-long programme for girls and their parents, it includes workshops and college recruitment for the girls, but also ensures that parents are aware of the benefits of STEM careers for their daughters. The programme was founded by an AAUW branch member in 2006 in Buffalo, New York, and in the past two years, it has been rolled out nationally. We now host 15 Tech Savvy days. Tech Savvy has been widely commended – including by the White House – for its efforts to introduce girls to the variety and importance of STEM careers.

AAUW’s 2015 National Convention will be held in San Diego, California, in June

Excitingly, a new Tech Savvy programme is being set up in Hungary, and it will incorporate a track for teachers to ensure that they are in the best position possible to encourage students to pursue STEM subjects. I suspect this is just one of many expansions to come.

In your opinion, what makes Tech Savvy and Tech Trek so effective?

What is unique about both programmes is that they are entirely volunteer run. These programmes really speak for how much our AAUW membership is passionate about not only giving back but making a difference for the next generation. We certainly provide a range of support, technical assistance and fundraising for programmes, but the actual implementation is carried out by volunteers. With this model, we can continue to grow the programme both nationally and globally. With Hungary as an example, there is exciting transferability to many other locations around the world.

Is AAUW looking to expand and build on the successes of these programmes in the future?

We are looking to ensure that both Tech Trek and Tech Savvy programmes have the same engineering and computing focus as our new report. One of the ways we have been doing that is through some of our corporate relationships. This year, we collaborated with the Verizon Foundation to offer a national app adventure course through our Tech Trek camps. We intend to expand these efforts over the next year. We have also been seeking other ways to build more activities related to coding and careers in developing areas, such as cyber security – areas to which girls have had little exposure.

Additionally, because we have such a strong model developing, we want to not only grow our footprint here in the US, but to build more international models so that our members and university partners abroad can implement these programmes too.

CAMPUS LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMES

AAUW has five national campus leadership programmes:

- National Conference for College Women Student Leaders (NCCWSL) – 1,000 women nationally and internationally attend the Conference every year in May/June
- National Student Advisory Council – a year-round leadership programme for 10 competitively selected students who then act as AAUW campus ambassadors and peer leaders at NCCWSL
- Campus Action Project (CAP) – every year AAUW grants US $5,000 to student-proposed projects based on AAUW research. This year, the CAP grants have aimed to tackle the biases and stereotypes that women face on college campuses
- Elect Her – a training workshop run on 50 college campuses for women aiming to run for student government or political office
- $tart $mart – takes place on more than 100 campuses a year to teach college women to negotiate their salaries to reduce the pay gap between men and women. An offshoot programme, Work Smart, performs a similar function but is aimed at professional women

“We reach tens of thousands of college women every year with these programmes and it is AAUW’s capability to build the confidence and skills of these women that we hope will prepare them for taking on leadership roles after college,” enthuses Kate Farrar, on the subject of AAUW’s unique leadership schemes.

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