More Than Just an Internship

Hannah Thompson

As I begin to wrap up the second semester of my first year of college I reflect on what I have learned throughout this year. I grew much more independent and responsible as many may have expected. I realized that college was a lot harder than high school, even though, I had originally thought it would be a walk in the park. I gained confidence in myself and my intellectual abilities and have been able to move one step closer to pursuing the career of my dreams. This year was difficult, however, with supportive mentors, family, and friends I was able to succeed. One organization in particular provided me with mentorship that paved a way for my success: IAmAWomanInSTEM.

IAmAWomanInSTEM is an initiative on campus that “focuses on developing and implementing an awareness campaign for all UK undergraduates and a mentoring program connecting volunteer UK undergraduate females who are in STEM+H majors and minors with UK female faculty members and women in business and industry with STEM backgrounds.” When I arrived on campus and learned about this organization, I immediately wanted to become involved. I had started a women’s empowerment organization at high school, so joining IAmAWomanInSTEM felt natural. I desired to be surrounded by peers similar to me and mentors who once were in the same place as I currently was. I met my mentor, Dr. Jagriti Chadha, at the first social meetings I attended. She is an internal medicine hospitalist and has been able to provide me with advice for pursuing medicine. She is a role model of mine and I know that I can always contact her if I need to. I’ve always wanted to pursue medicine, but have
always wondered if I could be great at my job and be a great mom as well. Being a doctor is my
dream, but I plan to eventually have a family as well. Dr. Chadha maintains a fine balance
between her career as a physician and mother of two. Seeing how she is able to do both is
refreshing and motivating. I am thankful to have her as a mentor.

Dr. Hollingsworth is the main glue in IAmAWomanInSTEM. She organizes the meetings
and gatherings, pairs mentors with students, and provides mentorship herself. I consider Dr.
Hollingsworth to also be a mentor of mine. I first met with her back in September to discuss
leadership in IAmAWomanInSTEM. She offered me a position on the Steering Board and I
immediately accepted. I was excited to begin working on efforts of women’s empowerment
and involvement in STEM. Being on the steering board, motivated me to create a leadership
initiative myself. That’s when I created “Woman of the Week”, a photographic and interview
series that features individuals to encourage and empower the studies of STEM students and
raise awareness of their experiences. Students, faculty, or anyone in the community can
nominate a female student, faculty member, or alumni that is passionate about the STEM field.
Each week, a woman is chosen and she is photographed and interviewed. The interview allows
her to share her experiences as a female working in a male-dominated industry and what it
means to be a woman in STEM. This series is published on all of the #IAmAWomanInSTEM
social media, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and our websites. It took some
time to get the project up off its feet, as do many new projects, however, once it was started it
gained momentum. So far, we have interviewed twelve women and hope to continue doing so
the following years. I ended up taking a EXP 396 course with Dr. Hollingsworth to learn more
about leadership in STEM, issues women in STEM were facing, and what we can do to prevent these issues from occurring.

I first learned about women in the sciences. I was assigned with watching a video by Dr. Margaret Schroeder and reading several articles. I quickly learned that being a woman in STEM was no easy feat. I learned that a lot of women in medical school get married and pregnant and then quickly quit the program. Hearing this, I thought about myself and what I would do if I had gotten married and pregnant during medical school. Would I quit and pursue a different profession? Would I just become a stay at home? Would I find a way to balance it all? I then realized that I would probably have to find a way to balance it all, such as Dr. Chadha had. At that point, I would feel guilty quitting medical school since I had already invested so much into the career. This topic transitioned into the effects of the stereotype of the stay at home mom. Some women feel guilty that they have to leave their children to go to work and some even wish that they were stay at home moms. I soon realized that this guilt was probably why some of those women had quit medical school. I think that this issue is rooted at gender expectations and stereotypes. It’s a natural instinct for a woman to care for her children, however, women shouldn’t have to give up the success of a great career to care to do so. These expectations can put great amounts of success on women who are trying to do it all, all the time. Women must balance the responsibilities of their career and family and deal with the stress and anxiety that comes with the territory. Dr. Schroeder taught me that it’s not easy being a woman in STEM, but it is doable. You can be a doctor or engineer and still raise a family. I think that it’s great that women of my generation are beginning to realize they are capable of doing this. The strength of a woman lies in her willpower to do what she wants the way she wants to.
During my second week of my EXP 396 course, I was asked to choose one value that is important to me from a list of several common core values. Upon looking at the list, I began to realize how each of these played a crucial role in how I identified myself. However, the one that stood out to me the most was “Growth”. The growth of my knowledge, faith, and service is crucial to my identity. I find it incredibly important to pursue a career that challenges and allows one to obtain new knowledge as much as possible. That’s why I decided to pursue a career in STEM. However, prior to this lesson I failed to realize the effect of the “confidence gap” and “imposter syndrome” on my female peers and mentors.

Imposter Syndrome effects individuals who feel as if they are not qualified for the work they are doing and fear being discovered as a fraud. The “confidence gap” plays a huge role in this concept. Studies show that women feel less qualified and self-assured as their male counterparts. I was shocked when I read The Atlantic’s article, “The Confidence Gap”. I quickly realized how often I doubted my own abilities and knowledge. The first time I scored below average on a chemistry test, I immediately began to think I wasn’t good enough. If I couldn’t get an A on this unit’s test, how could I possibly get an A in the course let alone keep a perfect GPA and get into Medical School? That one test shattered my scientific confidence, especially when I found out that one of my best friends, a boy, had scored much higher than me when he had studied probably half the time I had. Of course, we all wish there was a linear relationship between x amount of hours studied and our test score, but that’s not exactly how it works. Was he smarter than me? Was he simply just better at science than me? After reading this article, I noticed I wasn’t the only young woman who felt this way or asked questions of this nature.
Plenty of successful women have felt like an “imposter” in their field. Imposter Syndrome has even been identified by psychologists and its existence cannot be denied. I look around at my friends and realize many of us maintain a façade. A face in which we are calm, happy, and relaxed. We don’t want someone else to know that we’re struggling in a class, even though we might be staying up until two a.m. to just catch up on what’s going on in class. I’ve had friends lie about their test scores just because they’re “embarrassed” or “ashamed”.

However, one data point doesn’t create a trend. One bad test grade doesn’t define one’s scientific knowledge. Embarrassment and failures are necessary in order to succeed. But, even if one of my friends score an A on the next test they keep that achievement hidden. When I congratulate them on their grade I’ve heard responses, such as “Oh, it’s not a big deal. I just got lucky it wasn’t too hard.” Not only have I heard those responses, but I have also given them too. Women are more likely to credit their success to another individual or just pure luck. CathyCat wrote, “No matter how you got to where you are, someone believed that you could do the work, and you rose to the challenge and did it. It can be tricky to believe that you’ve earned your accomplishments but believe that you did the work. You have to have done it. Even if you had help, you contributed what you did, and that is not nothing.” I think it’s extremely important to give yourself credit where it’s due. I know that I have credited my success to other people in fear of being identified as a “know-it all” or even “arrogant”. However, there’s a fine line between arrogance and confidence. It’s especially important for our gender, to rise up and be proud of our achievements. I think I’ve always been proud of myself, however, just never wanted anyone else to know.

Maybe it just took me these articles to realize that my success should be recognized. As a woman I am just as capable as the men in the room and if they’re able to share their achievements I should to. I am proud of my academic success, but as mentioned before it didn’t always come
easy to me. I worked hard, studied for hours upon hours and wasn’t afraid to ask my instructor for help. Asking for help didn’t make me feel stupid, it made me feel proactive. One woman I interviewed for woman of the week, Olivia Prosper, even elaborated on imposter syndrome, “I find that women are more likely to downplay their achievements, abilities and success so I think it’s good to have high standards for yourself and push yourself, but also take a step back and look at yourself objectively to make sure you don’t deter yourself from moving forward because you have this somewhat bias view of how you’re doing relative to other people.” Women make up 48% of the workforce, but only 24% of the STEM workforce. If imposter syndrome and the confidence gap can be overcome I have no doubt women will rise in the STEM field.

Once these issues are overcome, it is important to build the brand of women pursuing STEM. About a year ago, Dr. Kate Eddens presented to several #IAmAWomanInSTEM and during this presentation she explained how we could build the brand for #IAmAWomanInSTEM. But, she also required these students to do a worksheet about instrumental and terminal values. Through this worksheet, I decided that values are learned and people decide which values are important to them. You may be raised in a home where certain values are placed upon you, but as an adult you get to decide which values determine your identity. I think one’s values will change over time, because as you grow up certain things become less important whereas other things become more important. As you mature, your identity matures and since your values change with your identity it is clear that your values will also change. Although, you might know what makes you “You” it is important to write them out so you can identify which values should never be disregarded. Once you write it out and talk about it to others it becomes more “Real”.

The values that became real to be included: loving, honesty, and intellectual ability. These are important to me because this is what stands out in other people to me. A kind person is one
that I respect and I hope to be one of those. It’s important to be honest because honesty defines your morality and no one enjoys the presence of a dishonest person. Intellectual is important to me because I desire to be smart. I desire to be knowledgeable on different subjects. I love to learn new things and think it’s crucial to develop more skills as you grow older. Happiness, family security, and national security were my top three terminal values. These values stood out to me because this is the type of home I grew up in and desire to have when I’m older. My parents worked very hard and did everything they could to provide me with a calm and happy childhood. My family always stuck together despite difficulties. The security of my family made me feel safe. I hope to provide that type of home to my future children. I chose national security because this became a huge aspect of my life at a fairly young age. My dad served in the army and I knew that he had a purpose for his work. National security is crucial because it’s more than just you or your family, it’s your neighbors, friends, and every citizen of our country. With those three things, I think I could be very content. I chose science as a career because I will be happy pursuing the field that I love and will be able to provide myself and my family with security. If need be (and hopefully not) I can support myself and my future children on my own. Science also has an impact on our nation’s security. We are the thinkers of the future, and without new ideas or inventions our nation would fall to others. Through her presentation, I began to think about these values and how they affected me. I realized that indentifying these values made me want to take even a bigger role on #IAmAWomanInSTEM. I hoped to get more undergraduate women involved in the Women of the Week iniative and that’s exactly what I did. Currently, several young women are conducting and transcribing interviews so that we can still have Woman of the Weeks during the summer season. I applied
for a scholarship through IAmAWomanInSTEM, sponsored by the Women and Philantrophy organization. I am thankful to have achieved the scholarship and am excited to see what I can do with the support. I hope to make Woman of the Week bigger than it currently is and expand it to different universities across the country. I would then create an interface or website where all of the interviews and images would be posted. I am ecstatic to begin planning this and building the IAmAWomanInSTEM Brand.

Statistically, women are less likely to ask for promotions, ask for a higher pay, and better work hours than their male counterparts. I never realized this, however, through a lesson in Gendered Communication and Negotiation became aware of this reality. Women are less likely to negotiate, but why? I think I understand the answer to this complicated question, women are more concerned about whether they’ll come off as bossy or arrogant, but a man typically doesn’t worry and just asks for what he believes he deserves. I hope that in my future, I am not scared to ask for a raise or to get paid the same as my male counterpart. I’ll be trying to pay off school, care for myself and maybe even a family, and the idea that I’ll look “bossy” won’t stop me. My priority will be my family and I, not what other people think of me. This lesson also focused on what is considered “appropriately feminine”. Women must dress a certain way to look professional, but not “too” professional. Women’s hair and makeup must be done to appear professional, however, they shouldn’t go “overboard” with it. These stressful expectations explain the reasons why women are less likely to negotiate than men. They may even question themselves and wonder if they even deserve a promotion. Pop culture reirretates these realities. In New Girl, the main character Jess believes she deserves a promotion to assistant principal, but she is scared to ask her boss for the promotion. Her friend,
a male PE teacher, takes her to the volleyball court and hit balls until she is pumped up and ready to ask for a promotion. Her male counterpart explains that she deserves it and should just ask for it, rather than being shy about it. I hope that the next generation of women will be willing to ask for what they want, especially when they deserve it.

It’s been documented that having a mentor can be very beneficial to one’s success. However, it can be difficult to find a mentor. Although, I am thankful to have met and obtained mentors during my first year of college, other young women are not so lucky. A presentation by Dr. Judy Goldsmith explained that mentoring women in STEM is important to the success of a student and the mentor, herself. Mentoring provides one with a sense of purpose, as one realizes they are capable of making a difference in someone’s life. There have been several websites created to help students find mentors, however, I think the best way to find a mentor is to just ask. Find someone, or perhaps even a few people who have pursued a career similar to the one that you’d like to pursue. This mentor can provide you with information that can make the journey to that career a tad bit easier. IAmAWomamInSTEM provides mentorships to any STEM+H student who desires one. I suggest all students take advantage of this opportunity.

As the title of this essay suggests, this EXP 396 course has been more than just an internship. Through the lessons I learned about myself while developing a greater understanding of the difficulties women in STEM often face. I had no idea the reality of the women around me and I have a greater appreciation for those women who power through and make their dreams realities. I hope to become one of those women one day.
https://www.uky.edu/iamawomaninstem/about

