

**Exploring inclusive programs and gender norms in STEM**  
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**Expanding Potential Co-Organizer**

The first Expanding Potential Meet Up was held in Albany, CA at Café Valparaiso on June 27, 2015. The evening consisted of conversations about how to create inclusive programs for underrepresented youth and how to address the complete gender spectrum. I had the pleasure of moderating "living room" conversations for pairs of speakers (Marlena Jackson and Shannon Noonan, Julia Chang and Nol Simonse). In addition, the meet up had a performance challenging gender norms by Nol. This was followed by lively informal discussion and mingling.

Marlena Jackson, founder of NexGeneGirls, and Shannon Noonan, Education and Community Partnerships Manager at the Gladstone Institutes, brought fresh perspectives from their experiences in running programs that expose students from underrepresented backgrounds, namely underrepresented minorities, low-income, and first generation to attend college, to research in STEM fields.

One stand out point was that you really must engage the surrounding community in your efforts and build a community with the students. Setting aside a day to create a safe space for the students to gain trust from program leaders and mentors and to share with each other creates a bond that will last throughout the program and in the future when incorporating alumni to serve as role models for incoming classes. Within this space, it is important to also set a precedent of respect and professionalism early on.

The best way to accomplish this positive sense of community is to listen at least as much, if not more, than you talk. Shannon prefers to spend most of her time listening to the students whereas Marlena says that it's okay to talk too... but in the process to make sure the student's voice is heard. At times, individual students will "go rogue" due to personal issues and/or an unstable home life. Listening in a one-on-one conversation in a quiet place is key here along with talking to their guardian, remaining professional, and connecting them to other resources. In the end, each student must know that they are valued in the program.

Marlena further stressed the sentiment of lending support to students stating, "It is important for young people to know that there are adults in their lives who are committed to seeing them succeed. It gives me great hope seeing so many compassionate individuals who want to impact the lives of future generations to exceed in the sciences."

Shannon appreciated the ability to work with others in her community and to share out to those interested in helping students break into the STEM field that might not otherwise have the opportunity to do so. She said, "I enjoyed sharing my experience working with underrepresented students in STEM outreach initiatives with the attendees of the Expanding Potential Meet-Up. Thanks for inviting me!" Both Marlena's and Shannon's words of wisdom gave a very honest perspective of running youth programs.

Shifting gears in the second half of the meet up, Nol Simonse, a professional modern dancer in the Bay Area, performed a self-choreographed piece challenging gender norms. Traditionally pointe is reserved for women but he donned a pair of pointe shoes and a dress to express his inner-self exposing his vulnerability. The performance brought tears to some attendees' eyes.

Afterwards, he sat down with Julia Chang, a recently graduated Ph.D. student at the University of California, Berkeley. During her tenure at Cal, she served as the President of Queer Grads and as a former co-chair of the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Community.

Julia had attended the first Expanding Potential workshop where she noticed disparities in speaker presentations that reflected her personal experiences. She hopes to change the academic climate through the classroom environment:

“My approach to serve as a panelist was a balance of personal reflection based on my own experiences as a queer Asian-American woman in STEM and an opportunity to listen and learn different approaches by my colleagues and peers in how they have navigated their experiences. From what I shared and heard, I hope that I am able to provide an inclusive classroom culture, where my students feel safe to participate, make mistakes, learn from each other, and also develop their own scientific identity and community.”

While it may seem that dance and STEM may have completely different approaches, the conversation highlighted lots of commonalities and areas of overlap. Both fields are very gendered. Nol pointed out that being stifled due to your gender results in greatly influencing how people work and the ability to express one's own creativity. To be truly creative in the lab and in dance, individuals need to feel comfortable to be themselves even if it makes others uncomfortable. This brought up the point of self-expression especially when being challenged due to your gender or sexuality. Both Julia and Nol stressed the importance of mentors and a welcoming environment in this context. Sometimes we need to do what is best rather than what is easiest and this extends to helping others that are discriminated against and there needs to be a greater amount of accountability in both fields.

Nol expressed the success of discussing dance and STEM in regards to gender norms, “Being a bit of an outsider, I wasn't sure what to expect, but was amazed at the sense of camaraderie and positivity shared by all the participants. As a teacher, having a forum to talk about issues we all share was inspiring. A really lovely group of people, I was honored to participate.”

The evening ended with attendees having small group discussions and following up with the individual speakers. There was a buzz about the room and a true sense of people opening up to each other to discuss some very personal and difficult issues that all of us often face and how to create change to make the STEM fields more inclusive.

Expanding Potential Meet Ups: Synberc invites anyone that would like to host their own meet up to contact the co-organizers, Shaila Kotadia and Kevin Costa. We will provide organizational support and will help with exploring topics important to your community.