

Harnessing the empowerment and action of Expanding Potential

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When I first heard about the Expanding Potential Workshop I'll have to admit I felt skeptical, little did I know that my skepticism would quickly transform into admiration for the workshop and enthusiasm to participate in it as the first talks were underway.

As a PhD student at UCSF I had attended a few different diversity/equity workshops both mandatory and "voluntary"; unfortunately, most of them were poor attempts at addressing the greater issue of the hostile culture that has persistently permeated academia. In fact, most of these efforts only tried to patch up the effects of the work culture, such as tackling poor representation of minorities and women in faculty positions, wage differences between men and women scientists, and the impostor syndrome felt by most first generation graduate students, among others. Although I attended several workshops and seminars that did take steps towards addressing the broader issues, it was clear that smarter approaches and real funding behind initiatives were needed. Despite the shortcomings in resources in academia, I was able to work with and become part of several gender equity and diversity-supporting student and Chancellor's groups at UCSF that I felt were making real strides to tackle the pervasive inequality problems in STEM both at the graduate and undergraduate level.

Because of these experiences, I approached the Expanding Potential Workshop with high expectations mixed with dread that I would likely be disappointed. However, I was intrigued further when I learned that the workshop aimed to concentrate on discussing and supporting innovative solutions to bias in STEM, not just data on the issues we face in STEM. My decision to attend was further cemented when I realized that I was ill-prepared to advise a friend of mine at Stanford on how to intervene in a case of unconscious bias despite my prior experience with diversity groups at UCSF. In fact, I signed up for the workshop when I learned that there was a sub-workshop geared towards bystander intervention in cases of unconscious bias.

Fortunately, the workshop surpassed all my expectations. Not only that, I found multiple ways to interact with the organizers of the Unconscious Bias Project, whose sub-workshop had ensured I attended the event. During the Expanding Potential Workshop I learned about much more than just unconscious bias. Every single speaker had compelling data and ideas to present. I found myself eagerly awaiting to meet presenters and quickly connecting with attendees whose enthusiastic attitudes and creative approaches to combating issues of equity in STEM mirrored my own desire to make things change. In fact, I felt that the workshop's attendees and speakers all contributed to consciously creating a supportive space in which difficult issues of discrimination and bias could be examined openly. I enjoyed connecting with attendees and found the times of 'intentional networking' during the reception a joy as I met like-minded people and was able to make fast friends and professional connections. I was able to connect with the leader of the Unconscious Bias Project, and learned of ways in which one can intervene as a bystander in cases of unconscious bias that are directed towards another person.

After the workshop I followed up with speakers and professional connections and felt inspired to attend the Unconscious Bias Project meetings. I felt energized from the flow of creative ideas at the workshop and decided to attend and ultimately join the Unconscious Bias Project as a content volunteer and cartoonist. Since the workshop, I've continued to meet with attendees and have expanded my career search focus to include opportunities in science communication as well as gender and diversity equity in STEM. I've attended seminars on how to leverage social media and blogging to deliver real scientific content to both scientists and non-scientists. I've reconnected with staff at UCSF that are looking to change the culture for staff that work in STEM. I contributed to one of the presenter's efforts on learning more about the intricacies and the difficulties of mediating student-professor issues of equity.

I was also able to give my friend at Stanford resources and ideas on how to intervene as a bystander in cases of unconscious bias, especially with a three step process that will help him decide what needs to be done: (1) Recognize the situation; (2) Decide to take action (could be reporting, checking in with both parties, saying something); and (3) Intervene effectively & safely. More than that, I was able to explain to my friend that simply recognizing that everyone is affected by unconscious bias and wanting to do something about it is a fantastic step forward for everyone.

In addition to the connections and strides I've made towards further developing my career trajectories, attending the workshop has made me feel that I'm finally on the right path to find the people I want to work with in my future career. On the whole, the Expanding Potential Workshop left me feeling refreshed and encouraged that there are like-minded people working to make STEM culture more inclusive and equitable.