

Overview: Expanding Potential Seed Project Award Program **Shaila Kotadia, Synberc Education, Outreach, and Diversity Manager**

After the first Expanding Potential Workshop that concentrated on Women in STEM, the organizing team received a great amount of feedback from the attendees. One of the biggest gaps in the first workshop was a call to action. While many of the issues were discussed, actionable solutions were not well highlighted. The eagerness of the attendees to do their part was palpable. We wanted to respect the voices of the community we were trying to reach and thus, used the feedback to grow the Expanding Potential program beyond the workshops.

To encourage and support programs that enact positive change for inclusivity in STEM, we sought to help the community establish a portfolio of Expanding Potential Seed Projects. We invited project leaders (anyone affiliated with a university or college, regardless of position) to apply for \$1,000 - \$5,000 to support the development of an innovative diversity initiative at their home institutions. Proposals needed to address underrepresented groups, serve a critical need in this space, build on synergistic relationships and partnerships, strive to affect multiple STEM fields, and scale with ease to additional institutions.

Out of a number of wonderful applications, we selected five awardees. Our selected awardees consisted of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in STEM fields, almost all of who are from underrepresented backgrounds. The five projects consisted of the Unconscious Bias Project, PopUp Museums, CU Prime Inclusion Workshops, Clear Direction Mentoring, and the Data and Diversity Course (to read more details on each project, visit [here](#)). All were exciting ideas that were clearly driven by passion to create a more inclusive STEM environment.

It was incredibly important to assist the awardees in building their projects to achieve these goals and to sustain their efforts in the long-term. At this stage of their careers, few of the awardees had strong relationships with evaluators and program developers but what they did have was their incredibly valuable personal experiences. Thus, they were taking on additional leadership roles by becoming program developers and assessing the value of their work. To assist in their success, additional mentorship and one-on-one feedback was available to all awardees to reduce the learning curve of these new roles.

And my, what success they achieved! We could have never predicted how impactful the five awardees' projects would turn out. The five awardees reached out to partners and the populations they aimed to serve and continuously shaped their programs keeping in mind outcomes that would best improve the STEM climate. To give them additional space to scale and connect nationally, each awardee gave a lightning talk (view their slides [here](#)) and a workshop at the [Expanding Potential 2016 Workshop](#). Workshop attendees had the opportunity to learn from the awardees and vice-versa to continue to develop and/or start similar projects.

Listening to the creativity and passion injected into their projects really solidified the importance of this program.

Another beneficial side effect is the network that the awardees themselves developed with each other. Connecting every few months provided the opportunity for the awardees to start to learn about each other's projects. Meeting in-person at the Expanding Potential 2016 Workshop was invaluable. Hearing each other's ideas, asking questions, making connections between projects – in a matter of two days new collaborations were blossoming and projects were spreading across the U.S.

Too often programs started at a single institution lack continuity, occur in silos, and do not have the capacity or funding to assess outcomes. Programs that serve underrepresented groups sometimes lack the voice of the individuals the program hopes to serve. We strove to fill those gaps by selecting project leaders that are the voice of underrepresented groups (especially in changing societal times), providing guidance as they developed their project, connecting them with social science researchers and program developers, and giving final feedback on how to scale and sustain their effective programs. In doing so, we have directly supported the growth of a new cohort of leaders, from underrepresented backgrounds, in diversity and inclusion program development that will, in turn, support additional new leaders. This cycle does not only lead to the potential of exponential growth of program leaders in diversity and inclusion, but also a shift towards inclusivity and empowerment of those from underrepresented backgrounds. Through the impact of these programs, we are closer to an actualized goal of equality in STEM. We must keep up!

If you would like more details on how the seed project program was set-up and coordinated, please contact [Shaila Kotadia](#).