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NPS Mentors Work to Close the Gender Gap in STEM

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Article By: MC2 Danica Sirmans

It's no secret that women are historically under-represented in the STEM disciplines, or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and have been for some time. Since 1990, the National Research Council's standing Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine has been charged with monitoring and advocating for action to increase the number of women entering the STEM workforce.

Mentorship is a frequent focal point for potential solutions, and it's with this notion in mind that NPS' own STEM Internship Coordinator, Alison Kerr, organized the Ph.D.s in Polka Dots luncheon just for the cadre of females within the 80-plus interns on campus this summer.

"I love providing you guys with role models – regardless of where you are and what you're learning," said Kerr. "It's about role models."

Held at NPS' Roman Plunge Reflecting Pool, Kerr welcomed the campus' 24 female high school and college summer interns to convene with two of the university's young female faculty, Defense Resources Management Institute Associate Professor Dr. Eva Regnier, and Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering Research Assistant Professor Dr. Deborah Goshorn. Rounding out the mentor team with another perspective was Graduate School of Operational and Information Sciences student Marine Corps. Maj. Keystella Mitchell.

Goshorn stressed the importance for resilience and perseverance and shared her experience with adversity.

"You'll each have a unique experience in your academic careers that will be full of ups and downs, but realize the downs are temporary and always look to the horizon because those peaks will always be there even if they seem to be far in the distance," she said. Regnier agreed, and advised the group to have the confidence to tell their own stories. "Everyone makes mistakes but stick to the technical fields and work hard," she said. "You'll have more options later. Tell your story as if you had every intention to do exactly what you did because in a way you had to go through those things to get where you are."

Mitchell enlisted in the Marine Corps 22 years ago before commissioning offered her new perspective.

"The best advice I can give you is to be versatile," said Mitchell. "Whether it be in school or otherwise, don't just stay locked into what you consider your specialty. Get out and see what everyone has to offer, you'd be surprised at how much you can learn and how much you can offer."

Hayley Oliver is a senior at a local high school and has always had a passion for the sciences. She participated with her high school robotics team at the Consortium for Robotics and Unmanned Systems and Research (CRUSER) Robots in the Roses Research Fair when it was held on the NPS last March.

Oliver took a page from Mitchell's book and diversified her portfolio. She served as an intern researching HADR with the NPS Department of Operations Research.

"I think this internship is great, I was referred by a teacher at my school around the same time I'd joined the robotics team at my school," said Oliver. "Engineering, computer science and biology have always been exciting to me so this has been a great experience. I've focused a lot on data analysis here so that's all been really new to me but I've learned a lot."

Dr. Susan Sanchez, a veteran professor in NPS' Department of Operations Research, welcomed the mentorship role with Oliver and guided her along her HADR research project.

"I think there are many situations where young women may opt out of STEM careers because they may think they'll be less fun or they may not have made a connection with someone to encourage them to pursue these fields early on," said Sanchez.

"It's been nice to see such excited young people, especially since this is my first year as a mentor," she added. "While there still is a gender gap, we've definitely made significant strides and that gap is slowly closing thanks to programs like these."

The ladies-only Ph.D.s in Polka Dots affair welcomed 24 students out of the 84 interning at NPS over the summer. The students participate in eight-week internships, and are assigned research projects that focus on areas such as computer security, space systems, renewable energy, humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR), and the modeling of virtual environments.

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NPS STEM Internship Coordinator Alison Kerr, left, hosts the annual Ph.D.s in Polka Dots luncheon at the Roman Plunge Reflecting Pool, July 10. Kerr welcomed the university's collection of female high school and college summer interns to meet with NPS faculty Drs. Eva Regnier and Deborah Goshorn for a networking and mentorship opportunity designed to encourage the students' pursuit of STEM careers.