



Nearly 100 Lehigh Faculty, Staff and Students Attended the International Day of Women and Girls in Science

By Timmy Dillard, LU/UN Communications Intern

Two full busloads of primarily female STEM students recently attended the International Day of Women and Girls in Science (IDWGIS) assembly at the United Nations headquarters in New York City. The 8th Annual IDWGIS program featured presentations by women in science, including several from NASA, Ambassadors, and NGO Presidents from around the world.

Most students on the trip were engineering majors visiting the UN headquarters for the first time.” We were pleased to partner with the RCEAS, to make this opportunity available to female students across a wide variety of STEM disciplines,” according to Dr. Bill Hunter, Lehigh’s Representative to the UN. “As gender equity is one of our key pillars, we expect to do many similar programs in the future”

Students got to hear from and interact with HRH Princess Dr. Nisreen El-Hashemite, Executive Director of the Royal Academy of Science International Trust (RASIT), which sponsors the event. After meeting Princess Dr. El-Hashemite, second year environmental engineering major Ellen Henry said, “It was encouraging to see a strong woman in science working hard to make sure that I and other women around me have opportunities to make a difference.”



The assembly also gave attendees the chance to ask questions to distinguished panel members. One Lehigh student in attendance, third year population health major Sofia Espinoza, posed a question about racial discrimination in the professional domain to members of the Space Science and Technology panel. Her question prompted an elaborate discussion from three panelists, including two women NASA scientists and the Director of the Indus International Research Foundation.

“To converse with these phenomenal women about their struggles in male-dominated fields really gave me hope and motivation that things are beginning to change,” according to Espinoza, who also served as a conference Rapporteur.

Two Lehigh professors were also featured among the accomplished women scientists to contribute to the discussions. Dr. Gabrielle String, assistant professor of civil & environmental engineering and community & population health, spoke on the “Transforming Cities and Infrastructure for Sustainable Future” panel. She presented ways in which SDG6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) should be integrated with SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).



Her presentation focused on the evolution of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Water Safety Plans (WSPs) and advocated for the importance of including female voices for all discussions about Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). In regard to WSPs, she said, "They are ways of bringing stakeholders together to more holistically look at systems...It's much more than engineering." She continued, "Understanding whose needs are not being met and what stakeholders are not included in the conversation is critical."

Dr. Virginia McSwain, associate professor of physics, served on the "Breaking Boundaries: Space Community I.D.E.A.S. for Sustainable Development" panel. In this discussion of how countries can leverage space science and technology to reach the SDGs, Dr. McSwain spoke about the status of involvement of women in the field of astronomy. She referenced NASA's adoption of a double-blind review system, where papers written by women could be reviewed with anonymity and without the obstruction of gender biases. "It opens up more opportunities for more junior people, more women, anyone who has an idea but has not yet made a huge impact on the field," she said. "The future of astronomy is looking very strong for women."

The Royal Academy of Science International Trust (RASIT), which organizes the IDWGIS, employed the help of a team of Lehigh students involved with the Lehigh / UN Partnership. Last December, three of them took on the responsibility of helping plan and market the event, recruit other schools to increase youth participation, and coordinate the registration of over 800 people. During the event, two student interns for the Lehigh / UN Partnership, Charlotte Brown and Jordyn Pykon, were responsible for photography, videography, and social media updates for RASIT. Brown, who was live-tweeting the event, also created a slideshow presentation to accompany the remarks of Olivia Cohn, co-founder of One Billion Voices: Girls in Science 4 SDGs International Platform.

Reflecting on being Administrative Lead for the team, Caroline Mierzwa, who is also a UN Youth Representative, said, "It was great experiencing large-scale event planning and diplomacy. You really have to make sure that all the Member States' needs and voices are being heard."

In addition to those helping plan and market the assembly, RASIT also appointed four students to serve as Rapporteurs, charged with reporting on the proceedings of the panels. The Rapporteurs included Espinoza, Sam Ginn, Madison Hale, and Timmy Dillard.

PHOTOS: Charlotte Brown