

Women learn to NAVIGATE a career in STEM

By Alia Lesnek

It can be difficult to be a woman in STEM. In addition to the inherent rigors of working in a technical field, women may also have to deal with bias, discrimination, and even outright harassment due to their gender. This is particularly evident in academia, where reports of pervasive sexual harassment (e.g., [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)) by professors and others in positions of power have recently surfaced. In light of these accusations, the American Geophysical Union updated their [Ethics Policy](#) to state that sexual harassment is as severe of a “scientific sin” as data fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, and to lay out serious professional consequences for members who are found guilty of harassment.

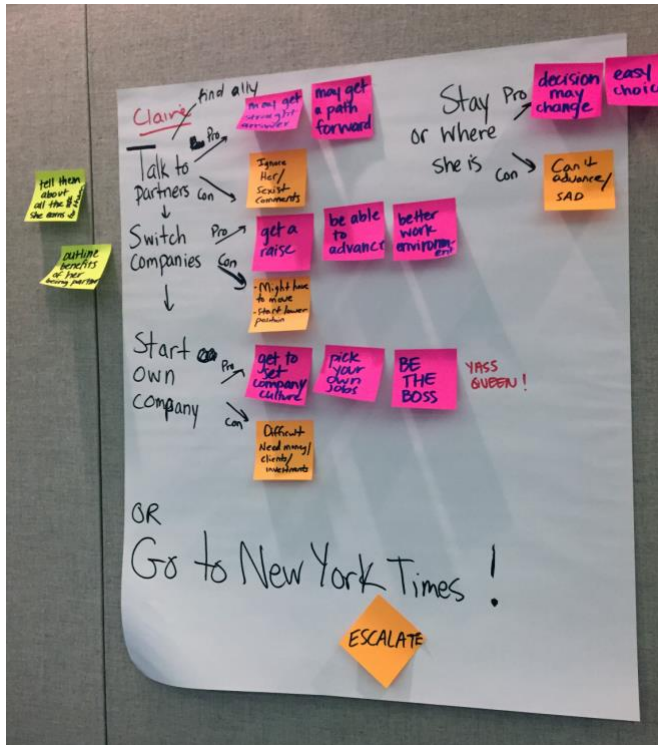
Despite the positive direction that these steps indicate on a systemic level, encountering gender-related bias and discrimination is still the reality for many women in STEM. These challenges can discourage women, especially women of color, from pursuing STEM careers. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), in 2016, Black women (2.9%), Latinas (3.6%), and Asian women (4.8%) made up small portions of those graduating with STEM degrees. These numbers drop [even further](#) when you consider the persistence of women in STEM fields and their prevalence in organizational leadership positions.

So how can these problems be addressed at the personal level? The [NAVIGATE Project](#), a UB-led venture sponsored by the National Science Foundation, aspires to do just that. From their website:

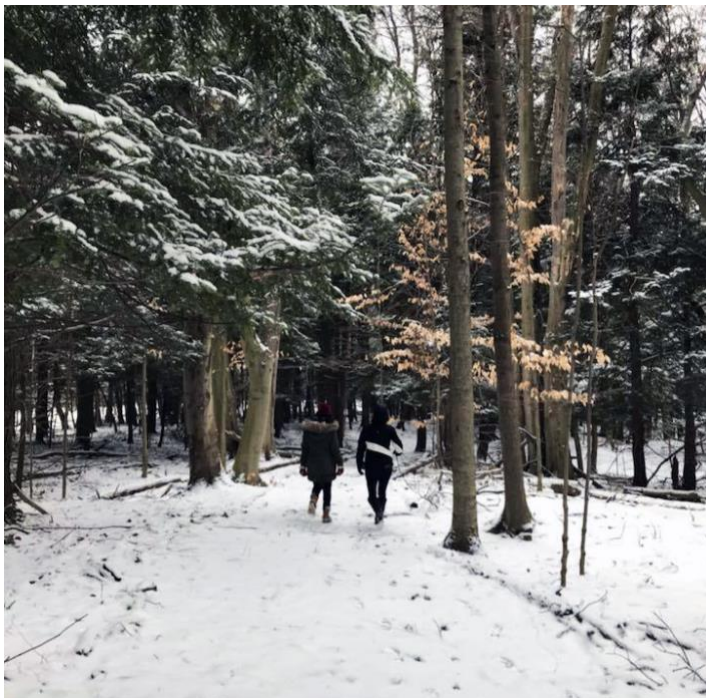
“The NAVIGATE Project aims to increase the number of women STEM graduates who persist in their chosen disciplines and achieve leadership roles. It is an innovative training program that relies on Case Study Teaching Methods to increase the skills of STEM women to navigate effectively past instances of bias, inequity or discrimination in the workforce.”

I was fortunate to be selected as a participant in the NAVIGATE Project, and last month, I traveled to Java, NY with about 40 other female graduate students to attend a three-day professional development conference. We covered a range of topics through case studies, collaborative activities, and discussions with invited speakers, including:

- Building a professional support network for career resilience
- Communicating your impacts and accomplishments
- Managing conflict
- Becoming a “change agent” in your organization
- Cultivating resilience in the face of adversity
- Organizing with other women across differences in race, sexuality, class, and ability status
- Working smarter, not harder
- Negotiating employment conditions



Here's an example of a decision tree we made for a case study. Claire, an environmental engineer, has been passed over for a promotion because her supervisors think she doesn't spend enough time with her family. This shows what actions she could take and some pros and cons of each one.



However, it wasn't all work – we also had time to explore the snowy, 300-acre property where the conference was held.

I am extremely grateful to be part of the NAVIGATE Project. We have one more event in April, but so far, my participation has given me an expanded set of skills and strategies to recognize and combat gender bias and discrimination while also keeping my career on track. I sincerely hope I won't have to use any of the strategies I've learned, but if I do, I'm glad I have them in my arsenal.

If you'd like to know more about the NAVIGATE Project, please contact me at alialesn@buffalo.edu. And now I'll leave you all with a picture of Lilly, Beaver Hollow's most adorable employee/giant teddy bear. Thanks for reading!

