

## 70 Women & 1 Guy:

### The Story of a Canadian Conference for

### Undergraduate Women in Physics

There must be an exceptionally good reason to travel to Quebec City during the cold January month, which is exactly what six Physics students from York did on January 9th. We boarded a small plane the morning of January 9th, and as we took off, we watched Toronto whip past us and glanced back at the noticeably substantial York University campus from thousands of feet up in the air. Once we landed in Quebec City, Laval University welcomed us with open arms.

We were six ladies on a mission, and that mission was the Canadian Conference for Undergraduate Women in Physics (CCUWiP). With only enough time to drop our bags, we blazed across the snowed-over campus to attend the first event held by the CCUWiP. Over the course of three jam-packed days, the conference organizers treated us to multiple



panels featuring presentations on potential career paths, student and industrial research, and graduate life. Talks were given by successful female physicists, detailing their personal and professional triumphs and struggles, and university grad fairs offered us a chance to see what academic possibilities existed for the future. In contrast, social events including a very productive cocktail hour and many lavish meals allowed for a less formal environment to get in-depth with speakers and professors, as well as our peers. Discussion topics ranged from the experience of being a woman in the world of physics to the search for the theorized magnetic monopole, from Biophysics and

Astrophysics, to the gendered workspace. We giggled about the dating prospects of being the only female in an upper year classroom, yet were also able to debate the serious problems surrounding the gender discrimination in our line of work.

Most are familiar with the stereotype that Physics is a field of study that attracts males more than females. Historically, this has been quite true in Canada, although there is a steady rate of improvement concerning the gendered enrolment rates. At the bachelor level in the year 08-09, women represented 39% of the total enrolled students in the physical sciences and mathematics, although the enrolment percentage further drops for Masters and PhD levels (NSERC, 2010). Even though we, ladies, already have our feet in the Physics door, there is still much room for improvement, and not only in terms of enrolment statistics, but also in terms of the gendered ideologies surrounding the study of Physics.

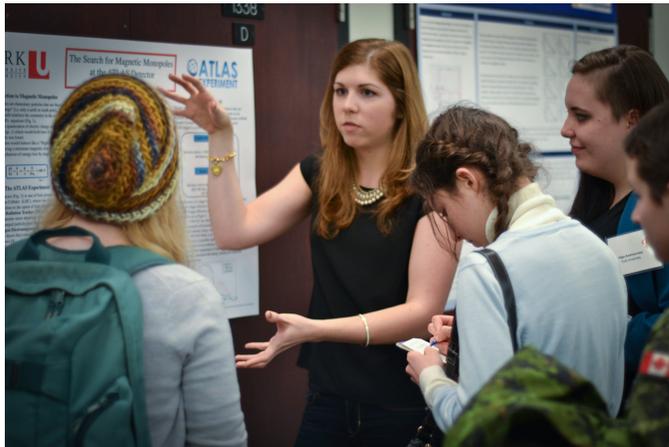
Our own Department of Physics and Astronomy (PHAS) here at York University is well aware of the gendered gap among students. Despite the prevalence of male faculty (a trait common to virtually all university), female students are provided the kinds of opportunities and mentorship that will ultimately close this gap. Last



semester, our department has arranged for few of our female students and Dr Wendy Taylor to meet Dr Shohini Ghose over lunch. Dr Ghose is not only an exceptionally successful physicist and an academic, but also a strong female role model and the direction of the Laurier Center for Women in Science. Following this very successful and productive lunch, the department has offered a total of six female students from our program tickets to fly to Quebec City to attend the CCUWiP, all for our academic and professional benefit.



In the PHAS department, among the students, females take on many leadership positions as well. Two of the departmental student associations (Physics Society at York U and Astronomy Club at York U) have a strong female presence; many female students become TA's and take on paid research and administration roles in the department. There is also currently an effort to create a student association - under the leadership and supervision of Dr Wendy Taylor - to further engage students in the discussion of Physics as a gendered field. Cumulatively, this leads to a shift in the ideology that Physics is a male-dominated field through positive mentorship, open discussion, inclusive space, and affirmative example.



Motivated and supported by our department, with many inquisitive questions and open minds, we travelled to attend the CCUWiP. By the end of our three-day stint, we were physically exhausted and mentally energized. Inspiration and motivation coursed through our veins as we returned home, excited about our future and grateful to our Department of Physics and Astronomy for the opportunity to have been a part of such a wonderful event. Inspiration was everywhere. It took on many forms including verbal

motivation from panelists, the support and comradery between conference attendees, and finally in the amazing personal presentations from the speakers who took time to share their incredible stories.

With notebook pages filled with new contacts, ideas, and plans for the future, we returned to York University. Further educated and immensely motivated, we see ourselves more determined to succeed and pass on the legacy of mentorship. There is a little girl out there, enrolling in her first year of junior school, still untainted by the false stereotype that Physics belongs to boys. Perhaps she will soon fall in love with Physics, and perhaps I will be the one to become her role model, giving her the motivation she will need to join us as a Physicist.



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Photography by Brittney Cooper

Reference: NSERC, 2010. "Women in Science and Engineering in Canada". <[http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/\\_doc/Reports-Rapports/Women\\_Science\\_Engineering\\_e.pdf](http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/_doc/Reports-Rapports/Women_Science_Engineering_e.pdf)>