Equitable Scholarship - Lessons learned from AWSN's new Scholarship Program for Alberta STEM students

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Summary

AWSN is a non-profit organization that, for over 25 years, has supported advocacy towards a more diverse and inclusive STEM future in Alberta and beyond. AWSN's primary focus has been to connect, unite, support, and promote STEM programs throughout the province. The AWSN Scholarship program is part of these larger equity efforts within the AWSN network.

Traditionally the AWSN Scholarship program offered one scholarship ($3000) with a focus on *underrepresented* populations in STEM, specifically the attrition-prone third and fourth year of an undergraduate program. With the support of TC Energy, this Scholarship program will be expanded to ten scholarships (each $3000) and will offer AWSN a chance to better define the word *underrepresented.*

Through the guidance of a GBA+, the updated program design will use an intersectional lens - defined as an interconnected analytical framework for understanding how the social and political identities of an individual intersect to create different types of systemic oppression and discrimination and lived experiences (Columbia Law School).

The award will be structured in a way that allows AWSN to distribute the scholarships in an equitable manner, limiting unconscious bias, stereotyping, and other barriers commonly faced by underrepresented groups within the review process, and to support AWSN's overall objective towards a more diverse and inclusive STEM future - where all can participate to their full capacity in STEM.

> *"Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strengthen the scientific and engineering communities and the quality, social relevance, and impact of research. Sound equity, diversity and inclusion practices increase access to the largest pool of qualified potential participants, enhance the integrity of a program's application and selection processes, strengthen the research outputs, and increase the overall excellence of research."* *(NSERC)*

This presentation will discuss the design of the program and lessons learned from the first year of scholarship distributions.

Theory / Method / Workflow

A Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) was used in the program design, incorporating current Best Practices within the greater equity, diversity and inclusion space.

GBA+ is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as a means to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives (Status of Women Canada).

As individuals, each of us has identifying factors that make us who we are and influences how we experience our day-to-day life. The spaces we inhabit can also (re)produce cultures that are unwelcoming and restrictive. AWSN intentions are to design a scholarship program that will support dedicated and engaged STEM students with leadership potential who may otherwise be overlooked. Key factors that will be considered include:

- **1) Intersectionality of identities** - such as gender, race, ability, and diversity of lived experiences.
- **2) Leadership** - this quality can be evident in many forms both inside and outside of STEM and can include formal and informal leadership experiences such as leading school projects, clubs, and community involvement, among others.
- **3) Timing** - The third to final year of the undergraduate experience can propel increased attrition of STEM students. Meanwhile, for other demographics (such as re-engaging STEM professionals with a 2+ year career gap) the barrier can be financial, limiting STEM re-engagers to even consider going back to be re-educated.
- **4) Programming History** - AWSN is cognisant to the historical hegemonic gendering of STEM programming and knowledge production, and how this can limit inclusivity of all students - from computer science to nursing.

The GBA+ lens will also be used as part of a qualitative and quantitative analysis on all data collected to inform and support the AWSN Scholarship team to refine the application and adjudication process - such as identifying award distribution gaps, what community groups are being missed for scholarship application announcements, and to assist the adjudicators as they work together to combat unconscious bias and stereotyping through the evaluation process.

Results, Observations, Conclusions
Ten - $3000 scholarships will be awarded to Alberta STEM Students in the fall of 2021.

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