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Contact: Dr. Afrin Naz
469.222.5027 mobile
Afrin.naz@mail.wvu.edu

Experts form EMPOWERS program to support and encourage women in STEM

Charleston, West Virginia – As the capacity for STEM careers in West Virginia increases, a new effort is rising to encourage women to seize opportunities in the field. It's called Establishing Mentoring Pipeline of Women through Education and Research in STEM – or EMPOWERS.

The program is a partnership between representatives from the NASA WV Space Grant Consortium, WVU Tech, Marshall University, West Virginia State University, West Virginia University, the WVU Extension Service's 4-H program, TechConnect West Virginia and the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences of West Virginia.

“EMPOWERS represents the best way of doing business – collaboratively and cooperatively across institutions and entities. We are very excited to be part of this new initiative to bring many of the parties working so hard to improve STEM education in our state to the table to work more effectively together,” said Dr. Melanie Page, Associate Vice President for Creative & Scholarly Activity at WVU.

EMPOWERS is designed to impact girls at every point along the STEM pathway, from K-12 and college all the way through their careers and beyond.

Dr. Afrin Naz, Associate Professor in the WVU Tech Department of Computer Science and Information Systems, is the chair of EMPOWERS.

“We want every person who comes into contact with this program to consider where they are in the STEM pipeline, how the program will help them at this particular stage and how they might, in turn, give back to other girls and women who are in these fields alongside them,” she said.

Where the goal is a strengthened female workforce, the primary tool to meet that goal is mentorship. EMPOWERS will pool partner resources to oversee, develop or enhance programs that encourage young girls to explore STEM fields. It will pair professionals with younger mentees to guide them through the process and, hopefully, continue the mentorship through high school, college and into the mentee's career.

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EMPOWERS is currently offering the “Ambassador” program. The effort is in its pilot phase in Raleigh County, West Virginia, where five undergraduate students are mentoring high school girls in science and math through various after-school activities. Upon completion of the pilot phase, EMPOWERS expects the program to spread into neighboring counties.

The EMPOWERS network will also draw in existing programs to enhance the viability and reach of their efforts. For example, West Virginia State University’s [Rocket Girls day camp](#) is a part of network; Rocket Girls encourages teenagers to explore engineering, design and rocketry. Further south, programs such as [Girls Interested in Robotics LEGO and Scratch \(GIRLS\)](#) enables the EMPOWERS network reach middle school students in the field of robotics at Fayette County.

The network will also tap into the statewide efforts of the WVU Extension Service’s 4-H program.

“The importance of having our West Virginia children succeed in life is a cornerstone of 4-H youth development,” said Sherry Swint, WVU Extension professor and 4-H agent for Kanawha County.

“4-H has been keeping pace with the needs of young people, offering many STEM-focused camps and clubs that strengthen children’s knowledge, skills and abilities. Being a collaborative member of EMPOWERS will allow WVU Extension and other STEM-focused organizations to synergistically support young females to follow their goals and dreams,” she said.

EMPOWERS was founded after the NASA WV Space Grant Consortium invited professionals from throughout the state to brainstorm ways to connect women in STEM.

“NASA WV Space Grant Consortium is pleased to support EMPOWERS, which has been founded by a number of highly dedicated individuals who are passionate about supporting the next generation of explorers in West Virginia. Our goals are very much compatible with those of EMPOWERS and we will work together to bring new and exciting STEM opportunities to the youth of West Virginia,” said Dr. Majid Jaridi, director of the consortium.

“EMPOWERS brings together exactly the right mix of people and organizations to create a robust pipeline of mentors and female STEM students,” said Anne Barth, executive director of TechConnect West Virginia. “It can be a game changer in terms of female workforce participation, and we’re thrilled to support this initiative,” she added.

As the EMPOWERS network grows, the program plans to tailor STEM outreach to the unique and often varied needs of different regions in the state. Ultimately, the partnership hopes to create a web of connected STEM professionals and students that cover the state and its STEM-related businesses and industries.

EMPOWERS is seeking women in STEM fields to get involved with operating and expanding programming throughout the state. Visit empowersusa.org to find out more.

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