There is a new STEM-based student organization on campus this semester! Women in STEM, founded by Allison Eagan, Abigail Weekly, and Shannon Havel, was started with a purpose in mind. Their mission? To encourage and support women interested in STEM fields, particularly fields where they are underrepresented, and to expose women to possible careers in STEM they may not have otherwise considered.

“My goal was to make it a social and academic club. I think you can learn a lot from different majors. My thought was that you might find an interest you didn’t know you had before because you’re not really exposed to a lot of these fields,” said Allison Eagan, Women in STEM president. Allison is a biology major at UNI, with a minor in chemistry. “You kind of just make a decision when you’re 18. ‘I’m going to major in this. There are so many more options than that.”

According to Allison, there are a variety of ways the organization will help out its members. There will be a study night once a month, where students can see what everyone else is studying, offer assistance, or maybe find a new interest. In addition, the group will offer resources and assistance for members’ academic pursuits. “Most of us are planning on going to graduate school so you’re going to need a resume or statement and there are all things that we can touch on and help each other with even though our majors are so different.”

Women in STEM plans to get involved with other women-oriented student organizations as well. They have already reached out to existing groups like Women in Computing to come to their events. They do not have any large events planned yet because they are still so new, but Allison thought doing a collaboration with another student organization or department would be a great way to get their feet wet. One of their potential collaborations would be with Northern Iowa Feminists and Women’s and Gender Studies for Women’s History Month.

Allison would like anyone interested to know that you do not have to be a studying a STEM major to attend meetings. The group is open to anyone and everyone interested in supporting the idea of women in STEM. “If you like science or are friends with people in science or it’s just something you want to add as a minor, I think it would be fun to come. We don’t only focus on science, either. One of our speakers coming is going to talk about stress—how to deal with stress around finals or stuff like that.”

The group’s advisor is Dr. Brittany Flokstra from UNI’s department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. According to her, the timing of the group’s formation was a great coincidence. “What’s interesting is that at the same time I was talking to the provost. They were considering some kind of women in STEM initiative,” she explained. “So we had
been chatting about that and then Allison just walks in one day and says, ‘I want to start this group and we’re looking for a faculty advisor.’ I’m like, yes! That is where I want to spend my time and energy.”

According to the National Science Foundation, the proportion of women awarded degrees in the sciences has risen for most fields since 1995. However, while the proportion of women with degrees social sciences and biosciences today is fairly high (ranging from 51 to 58% depending on the field or degree level), the proportion of women with degrees in computer science, physics, or engineering is fairly low. For example, despite substantial increases in the number of women receiving degrees in physics, the proportion of women working in the field is only 20% (National Science Foundation, 2017).

This is why Dr. Flokstra believes that groups like Women in STEM are important for the purpose of boosting visibility. She explains that, while things are better for women and other minority groups in the sciences now than they used to be, that visibility can make a difference. This is especially true for those who might not consider a certain career because they have not seen many people like them in that role. That exposure to difference fields and careers is a part of the group’s mission.

Dr. Flokstra loves Allison’s idea of using the group to support each other. She dislikes the stereotypical image of women in professional settings being catty to each other, believing it to be a false one. “I find that in academia, for the most part, we [women] tend to lift each other up.” This is exactly what they are doing with Women in STEM.

She would also like to urge students to come to the group’s meetings, stating that more input from other students could help shape the group in the future. “Because we’re so new, we’re still figuring out what exactly we would like this to be. So we’re at a really great place because we have a vision, and Allison has a very clear vision, and we have a communal idea of what we want this to look like moving forward,” she said. “But that it is not rigid. It’s not set. We’re open to the idea that other people are going to be coming in with ideas of what this group could be or could do.”

The main meetings will be held once a month, with guest speakers at each meeting. Please email Allison Eagan at eagan@uni.edu for more information.

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