

Role Models Make a Difference

A Recipe for Success

By Linda S. Kekelis, PhD, Rebecca Wepsic Ancheta, PhD, and Jeri Countryman, MA

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Becky Ancheta conducts qualitative evaluation research for the Techbridge Program, and enjoys learning and writing about girls' interests in science and technology. Becky has a doctorate in sociology from the University of California, San Francisco. For the past four years, she was an Affiliated Scholar at Stanford University's Institute for Research on Women and Gender. In her free time she enjoys reading Nancy Drew with her daughter, swimming and talking with friends. Becky recalls: "I always excelled in high school biology classes. In college I continued taking advanced science classes and did very well. However I took the advice of a college academic adviser who suggested I drop science classes in favor of 'lighter' courses, and never returned to the science pipeline. Working with the Techbridge Program gives me the opportunity to reconnect with my interest in science." She can be contacted at beckyancheta@sbcglobal.net.

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Decisions that affect career choice are made long before young adults enter the workforce. As early as kindergarten, children's career choices are influenced by sex-role stereotypes. In middle school, students choose courses and extracurricular activities that influence their academic and career paths. For many girls a career in science or technology is never considered an option.

The problem isn't with the girls. A number of factors can limit girls' participation in science and technology: lack of encour-

agement, limited enrichment opportunities, uninviting science and math courses, and lack of confidence.¹ Role models are often presented as a means to counteract these factors and to encourage girls in science and technology.

While there are many programs that introduce role models to youth, few report on the challenges involved or the kinds of support required for their success. In this article we present resources to support role models and a discussion of the lessons learned from the Techbridge program. We have found that role models can be an important influence in shaping the academic and career paths of girls.

ABOUT THE TECHBRIDGE PROGRAM

Hosted by Chabot Space & Science Center in Oakland, CA, Techbridge is a multifaceted program that encourages girls in science and technology.² Since its inception in 2000, Techbridge has served over 700 girls through its after school programs in elementary, middle, and high schools. The program also offers training and resources for teachers and families.

- The girls in Techbridge represent a broad range of ethnic backgrounds and economic circumstances. A primary mission of Techbridge is to serve girls who might not otherwise have access to after school or summer programs in science and technology.
- Techbridge programs are currently hosted at 12 schools in Northern California, including one co-educational program at the California School for the Blind.
- Through Techbridge, girls are introduced to science and technology via a variety of projects that appeal to their interests — including environmental science, digital storytelling, web page design, animation, and robotics.
- Techbridge supports a role model program, inviting women who have careers in science and technology into the classroom, and bringing girls to the worksites of scientists and engineers.

Girls Not Choosing Science and Technology Careers

In our first year, we learned that even with positive experiences in Techbridge, most girls did not aspire to careers in science or technology. We discovered that while girls enjoyed the program's hands-on activities and acquired skills and confidence required for scientific and technical careers, these experiences by themselves were not sufficient to motivate most girls toward a science or technical career. One middle school girl told us that although she enjoys the activities in Techbridge, it is "just something fun... I can't see myself making that a career."

If not a career in a technical or scientific field, then what were the girls interested in? For some girls, "pink collar" careers were on their list because these are the jobs performed by women in their lives. Some shared hopes to open a beauty salon or nail shop, explaining they are good at doing hair and nails. These career aspirations sometimes reflected the messages they receive from parents, relatives, and friends. One girl told us, "I have been thinking about hairstyling because I do my sister's hair... They [family] told me, 'Go to hair styling school because I'm really good at hair-styling.'"

Often girls had more than one occupation in mind, sometimes with very different educational requirements and career trajectories. Several girls expressed primary interest in becoming a singer or actress, with "back-up" careers of doctor or computer programmer. Because girls often make academic choices based on their primary career interest, they may not stay in the educational pipeline for their back-up careers in science.

We found, however, that Techbridge girls who were fortunate to have science and technology role models within their families proved the exception to this trend. Having a family member, who has a career in science or technology, was one of the primary characteristics of girls who were interested in these fields. These fami-

ly members provided encouragement, and an example of the rewards of a career in these fields.³

Role Models Are the Necessary Link in the Academic and Career Pipeline

For students who do not have a family member in a scientific or technical career to share his or her work and to encourage them to follow in their footsteps, role models are particularly important. For these students, role models help combat stereotyped images and also communicate information about the work and the steps needed to prepare for a career in science.

A Recipe for Success

With each role model and field trip, our staff learned lessons for introducing role models to girls. From follow-up conversations with role models, feedback from students and teachers, and survey and interview data we have identified the following seven key ingredients for success.

- Be Personal and Passionate About Your Career
- Introduce Fun and Interactive Activities
- Do Some Public Relations About Why Science Matters
- Share Your Struggles and How You Gained Confidence
- Fill a Gap with Academic and Career Guidance

"It was inspirational to see all these female engineers... that enjoy their jobs. And it was cool to learn why they got this job, not only because they loved math but because they liked to work with other things and other people.

So that's why I want to be an engineer now because after working with these role models, it inspired me to become one of the engineers."

— Middle school girl describing meeting engineers who worked at Google

"Where am I going to be [in 10 years]? I'm a singer on Broadway. But if I don't do Broadway, my friend's always trying to get me into being a dental hygienist."

— Middle school girl

“Erika T. was my favorite role model because she was upbeat and energetic, had a great personality.”

— Middle school student

- Facilitate Work Site Visits
- Training and Support Are Essential

Be Personal and Passionate About Your Career

Interactions with role models and field trips require the right combination of academic and career guidance and social engagement. The key is to be personal and passionate. Even the most remarkable career won't inspire if students can't relate to you. We identified four specific avenues for encouraging a personal connection between role models and students:

1. Communicate with students before your visit
2. Share your hobbies and social life
3. Relate your childhood dreams
4. Express your enthusiasm for your career

1. Communicate with students before your visit

Before setting foot in the classroom, many of our role models begin to create a personal relationship with our students. They exchange photos and biographies via email and in addition to describing what they do at work, they share personal information about themselves — favorite hobbies, pets, family life, and childhood dreams. Getting background information on the girls can help a role model relate to the students. Knowing who is fluent in Mandarin or Spanish, who volunteers at a food kitchen, or who plays a competitive game of soccer can be a starter for discussion. In fact, you can relate these skills and interests to qualifications for careers in science and capital for high-level positions. Let students know that the leadership and teamwork they develop in middle school can take them far in their studies and careers.

2. Share your hobbies and social life

Let students know that your work isn't 24/7 and that your job leaves room for other interests that help define who you are. Google Program Manager, Winnie Lam, shared that she volunteers at a seniors' home and likes to play the piano and ride her bike when she's not working. Jet Propulsion Laboratory Systems Engineer, Jennifer Mindow, wrote, “Ever since I can remember, I have stared up at the stars and been fascinated with space and flight.” This curiosity for how and why everything works is a recurring thread for our role models — not only reflected through their work but also through their hobbies and social life. Image is important to adolescent girls and role models can help dispel the “mad scientist” and “geek” stereotypes many students associate with science and technology by highlighting their social pursuits.



Kitty De Jong with Techbridge students.

3. Relate your childhood dreams

Think back to when you were eleven. What jobs were you thinking about? Who were your role models? These reflections will help you prepare for your visit. In fact, your personal journey that begins in childhood can be as interesting to girls as the work you do. During your introduction address the following questions: What were your dreams as a child? Why did you choose your career? How did you get to where you are? Did you encounter any bumps along the way and what did you learn from them? Girls are eager to hear about these details, which help them relate to you.

Dr. Kitty de Jong (AWIS East Bay Chapter) has visited several of our Techbridge programs over the years. She begins her visit by recounting how her interest in science stemmed from a paper she wrote as a young girl in Holland. Thanks to her mother, Kitty still has the paper she wrote about Louis Pasteur and she brings it to show our students. While doing research on Pasteur, Kitty discovered a passion for discovering what makes people sick, which she pursues as a Research Biochemist at Children's Hospital Oakland Research Institute.

We also have role models that changed their minds many times before settling on a career in science. Along the way, they explored interests in a variety of fields before focusing on science. These varied paths resonate with different students and help each girl feel that she is normal.

4. Express your enthusiasm for your career

Take time to think about the rewards of your career. Communicate your passion for your work and you will help girls see that a career in science can be personally rewarding. Don't be afraid to gush about why you love to go to work and do the job you do. Enthusiasm and passion go a long way. Not every job offers such intense personal rewards and it can

“I thought it was really cool because she's... really enthusiastic, and she rides a motorcycle.”

— Middle school student
describing a role model visit

inspire a girl to contemplate a career like yours. For most students, careers are abstract and they are not aware of why they should consider a career in science.

Introduce Fun and Interactive Activities

What makes a visit by a role model worthwhile for students? Here is how one of our students answered this question: “When we can experience it somehow. There have been a couple of people who came in and talked about their careers. That wasn’t very exciting. But having a connection to their careers, doing something” that was judged fun and worthwhile by students. There are five key guidelines we recommend for ensuring a fun and interactive presentation:

1. Start with an icebreaker
2. Introduce a hands-on activity
3. Keep audio-visuals short and interesting
4. Encourage questions
5. Take a team approach

1. Start with an icebreaker

In order to get every visit off to an interactive start, we recommend that role models begin with an icebreaker. These can be as simple as sharing interesting facts about yourself or learning the students’ names and favorite subjects in schools.

One of our favorite icebreaker activities is “Truth, Truth, Untruth,” which works well with a team of role models. For this ice-breaker, each role model shares two facts along with one untruth about herself. Can you guess which is the untruth from these statements shared by Assistant Project Manager Julie Fahrion who works for Swinerton Incorporated, a construction firm in Concord, California? “I like to visit Mexico in July. I am a grandmother. I have been skydiving.” It turns out that Julie is a skydiving grandmother who doesn’t like to visit Mexico in July.

As her icebreaker, California State Parks Ranger Sandra Butcher, invited girls to describe themselves using the first letter of their first name. Sandra launched the exercise with silly, sassy, snowboarder, and smart. The exercise helped Sandra learn the names of each girl so that she could later call them by name during the nature hike she led around Candlestick Point State Park. These introductions help set the tone of a role model’s visit — interactive and fun.

2. Introduce a hands-on activity

Ask yourself, “what hands-on activities can I lead that will introduce my career and help demystify my work?” Visits with role models can allow girls to try a variety of different scientific activities in a supportive environment. These experiences that are

“I thought that was really fun. They had lots of displays and activities, so we were doing stuff all the time. Being at the solar panel and looking at the grassy green roof, and different kinds of glass. I really liked that.”

—High school student



A Techbridge student encounters bone marrow for the first time.

removed from the pressures and confines of classes often spark an interest in science.

In thinking about an activity to share with students, you want to come up with one that is fun and interactive and that will offer a snapshot of your job. From experience, we recommend an activity that is simple to conduct and one that will give you a chance to connect with the students. Begin with a short introduction of the subject matter and explain any special concepts or terms that may be unfamiliar to students. We do mean a “short” introduction since too much information and too many technical terms will only turn off students and leave less time for the hands-on activity which is likely to be what turns them on.

One teacher related the following experience during a field trip: “Sometimes they didn’t really know how to talk to the kids. So they were showing the kids some equipment, and the kids had no idea what the equipment was for. Finally, one of the kids was like, ‘Oh, can we see it?’ And they cut this big crazy piece of wood, and the machines were squealing, and that part they liked. That was the one part where they had everyone’s attention.”

3. Keep audio-visuals short and interesting

Do bring in objects students can observe and/or handle. Do not ask students to sit through a PowerPoint presentation or video longer than 10 minutes. They are not likely to hold students’ attention. Less is better and we recommend leaving the group wanting to know more about what you do, rather than overloading students with too many facts and details. If you’d like to get some confirmation that you are on target with your presentation, send an outline in advance to the teacher or staff that work with the students you are planning to visit. They will be able to give you constructive feedback to help make your visit a success.

When Kitty visits our students she brings along an assortment of materials that help her show and tell her research. A blood cell made of Play Dough helps students understand the cellular make-up of blood. She brings a centrifuge that she uses to spin blood and show the separation of red and white blood cells. Kitty also brings bones from her butcher that allow students to look at and learn about blood-producing bone marrow. These resources help

Kitty explain her research on sickle cell anemia in terms that middle school students can understand.

In a focus group with teachers, one teacher described Kitty's visit to her middle school Techbridge program:

"She was so great. At first I was worried, I have to say, because — biochemist? They're not gonna dig that. But she brought in vials of blood! And a centrifuge. The girls are like, 'I've seen one of those on CSI!' That just hooked them in, and they were there for the ride... She brought in bones from the butcher, and they put on their latex gloves and passed around the bone. They poked at the bone marrow and all of this sticky squishy stuff coming off the bone. Oh, they had such a great time!"

After Kitty's visit to Techbridge, these students were eager to share their new knowledge about blood in their regular science class. The teacher describes that in her life science class, "those seventh-grade hands were up, and — 'Oh, yeah, that's plasma' and it was awesome!"

Mechanical engineer, Lyn Gomes with Carollo Engineers, brings hairdryers from thrift stores for students to take apart. While this activity isn't one that she performs on the job, it does give the girls an opportunity to feel what it's like to be an engineer. As the girls take apart the hairdryers, Lyn explains the different kinds of engineering involved in the design and construction of the appliances. At the end of the activity, she encourages the girls to explain how hairdryers work. She also invites the girls to critique the designs of their hairdryers and to offer ideas to make a better design. This reverse engineering activity never fails to create a spark in the girls.

4. Encourage questions

Another way to keep your visit interactive is to invite questions early on rather than saving them until the end. On a recent visit, Lyn Gomes regularly stopped and invited the girls to ask questions and share comments. This elicited many more questions than usual and also encouraged more students to participate.

Some girls are shy and no matter how much they are encouraged to speak are not willing to ask questions in front of a group. If you save time for one-on-one interactions at the end of your visit, we find that these students will come up and ask questions or seek advice.

5. Take a team approach

One of our most successful visits this year was by a team of role models that worked in building and green construction. The group was wonderfully diverse and engaging. One role model was well established in her career, another new to the job, and two in between. They started off sharing their personal stories and later



Lyn Gomes working one-on-one with a Techbridge student.

hosted stations that gave the girls a snapshot of their green construction practices. We imagine that planning for this visit as well as presenting to the high school girls from Oakland Technical High School was more enjoyable with four women to rely on.

Do Some Public Relations About Why Science Matters

Girls we talked to place a high value on meaningful work that helps make the world a better place. Unfortunately, many girls do not consider science and technology compatible with this interest. One of our graduates, who is pursuing a college major in engineering, described this belief about engineering and science. When she was introduced to role models that contradicted this belief, she found their visit immensely rewarding. Their explanations of how engineering can be a benefit for humankind were personally validating for this student who is pursuing an engineering path, yet had often perceived that path as at odds with her personal values.

Role models can show girls (and their families) the interesting and useful applications of science. Kitty de Jong explained to our girls how her research on blood may help in the treatment of those with sickle cell anemia. This information was highly relevant to several of our students because they had family members with the affliction. Ranger Sandra Butcher discussed the clean up and restoration of the shoreline at Candlestick Point State Park, which had been a dumping ground for toxic pollutants.

*"It would be so fun if I could make a difference in the world...
to be able to make a difference in something."*

—High school student

*"Confidence in your chosen field comes with time and experience.
I struggle to feel confident as I continue to learn new things ...
You just have to keep going, take one thing at a time,
and you'll get there."*

—Lyn Gomes speaking to high school students
for National Engineers Week 2004

It is important to help make the connections for girls, showing them how your career in science is meaningful and may improve the welfare of people and the environment. Once girls know the rewards and value of careers in science, they are more likely to pursue those careers, and do the work needed to prepare for them.

Share Your Struggles and How You Gained Confidence

Research suggests that confidence rather than competence is often the hurdle that keeps girls from pursuing studies in science, math, and technology.

Did you ever struggle with a science class, fail on a project, get shut out of a lab assignment by boys, or get discouraged by a professor? Instead of giving up, what did you do? Give students practical advice for when they are faced with similar challenges. Finding a tutor, forming a study group, and repeating a class rather than dropping out are ways to cope with failure or overcome challenges.

One seventh grade girl told us that when a role model shared her feelings about math, it helped her to feel okay about her own experience, “I don’t really know what I want to do, and she [the role model] talked about how she didn’t really know what to do at all either. So she went to junior college, and she liked math but wasn’t ‘I love it so much!’ And it’s the same with me, kind of. So then it kind of made me be okay...”

Rather than gloss over times in your life when you were at a crossroads, talk to girls about how you coped with these experiences and how important it is to learn not to let feelings get in the way of pursuing studies and a career in science. You can make a difference in a girl’s future. A high school student who was struggling with confidence in her classes talked one-on-one with Lyn Gomes after a panel discussion and reflected, “I realized that everyone has obstacles to overcome. Lyn inspired me to continue to follow my dreams.”

Fill a Gap with Academic and Career Guidance

Every student that you meet may not choose a career path in science, but you can be an important influence in their lives, helping to provide education about a variety of careers. Regard a visit with students as an opportunity to share life lessons that will help them in their studies and in whatever career path they follow.

Students make important academic and career decisions, often with little guidance from adults. Most students receive limited career guidance in their schools.⁴ While students report that they receive the most guidance at home, parents are often ill equipped to handle this role. Many parents lack knowledge about jobs and the academic prerequisites for today’s workforce.

We identified three important areas of career guidance that are critical when introducing students to careers in science and



“This has really got me thinking of the career path I would like to take and that to me is important.”

—High school student

technology: identifying educational requirements, offering practical tips for staying in the pipeline, and discussing financial and personal rewards.

1. Identify educational requirements

As a role model, discuss educational requirements and encourage students to select challenging academic courses. For some, math and science may be a challenge and your influence may help them realize the importance of sticking with the courses that will help them stay on track for a career in science. Hearing that everything didn’t come easy for you or that you didn’t get the highest marks in all your math and science classes will help many students who lack the confidence or believe that they’re not smart enough to be a scientist. Stress the importance of not giving up when the going gets tough and the payoffs for perseverance.

2. Offer tips for staying in the science and technology pipeline

Offer students practical tips for right here, right now. For elemen-

My favorite [field trip] was JPL... Being able to go there and see the Rover and then hearing when it did reach Mars.

I was like, “Oh, we saw that!”

—High school student

“I’m really nervous.”

—Role model

tary and middle school students, after school programs like Techbridge or summer classes at a local science center can help ignite an interest in science or rekindle enthusiasm that may have been dampened by a less than positive classroom experience. For high school students, information about summer internships and financial aid for college will be much appreciated. Google programmer Patricia Legaspi described how her college education was financed by a Gates Millennium Scholarship. In high school, Patricia did not have plans to attend college but instead intended to graduate and get a job to help support her family. Through the guidance of teachers and counselors, she was successful in finding financial aid to support her college education. Hearing stories like this one from role models like Patricia are especially relevant for students who will be the first members of their families to go to college.

3. Discuss Financial and Personal Rewards

Don't be afraid to talk about the starting salaries and financial rewards of your occupation. Mechanical engineer Lyn Gomes told students what they could expect to earn as starting engineers. Information like this is valuable since most students don't talk about money matters with their parents. Without these conversations, students fail to take into account job salaries and benefits when they're choosing a career. Knowing that the median annual salary for professional engineers is over \$81,000 made a career in engineering more appealing to some of our students. Learning about flexible schedules, sabbaticals, and medical benefits can also help students better understand the rewards associated with careers in science and technical careers.

Facilitate Work Site Visits

There is something about being able to see what you do and where you do it that inspires students. The importance of seeing role models at their jobs was a recurring theme among our students. After a field trip to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, one girl commented, "I didn't even know those jobs existed." She described the work of one of the engineers working on the Mars Exploration Rover, "That was the most amazing job. She gets to sit there and play with these Rovers and then gets paid... Her room was like a sandbox... It's pretty cool." Parents also commented on the value of these role models for their daughters, "It's the going to where the scientists and engineers work, to see what they do, and being in the environment to see what it's really like, as opposed to hearing stories about it."

If possible, arrange for a work site visit for students. For these visits, you will want to follow the same guidelines as a classroom visit — keeping it personal and passionate, fun and interactive. If it's not possible to bring a group of students to work with you, consider inviting one or two students to job-shadow you. Invite your colleagues to help by spending a half hour of their time talking with the visiting student about their jobs and answering questions.

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Training and Support Are Essential

One role model who had not participated in our training confessed her insecurities while she was talking in front of a group of our students. It can be intimidating standing before a group of middle school students, especially if you haven't had much experience with youth.

Knowing how to interact with youth and lead an activity for a roomful of sixth graders probably isn't something most scientists learn in college or on the job. Yet, this is what you need to know to make your visit a success. In preparation for their visits, our Techbridge staff offer role models personalized training to teach them how to present themselves in ways that will have the most successful impact on girls. Although we can't provide every role model this level of support, we hope that the ideas and suggestions in this article will help you have a successful experience.

Now that you've read this article we hope that you are inspired and feel prepared to be a role model for a classroom or after school program where you can inspire students in science. As a role model you can make a difference in the future of a student. If you don't already have a contact in your community where you can volunteer as a role model, we recommend checking with organizations like Girl Scouts and Girls Incorporated that serve girls or with science centers or after school programs in local public schools that offer science and technology-based activities. ♦

Resources

For more resources to help plan a visit to a classroom or field trip, visit the Techbridge website at www.techbridgegirls.org.

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