

Epistimi: Women in STEMM supporting each other in leadership development



Epistimi workshop in Athens, Greece. Summer 2023.

Many leadership challenges are general, but some are specific to women in STEMM. In Epistimi's programs, participants benefit from the expertise of female STEMM leaders.

By Angeliki Artemis (Diane) Rigos with Janet G. Hering and Patricia A. Maurice
19 September 2023, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7997240

Our initial post on initiatives features Angeliki Artemis (Diane) Rigos [1], the founder of the Epistimi [2] program that is hosting this blog. Launched in 2021, Epistimi's goal is to advance, increase, and encourage the leadership and presence of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Medicine (STEMM) around the globe. Epistimi pursues its goal by offering classes and workshops, providing information, training, mentoring, and advising, and building networks among women in the STEMM professions and related organizations.

Although they did not know each other at the time, both Diane and Janet studied chemistry as undergraduates at Cornell University and completed their doctorates at MIT. Diane is a scientist, educator, and consultant interested in working across disciplines to promote sustainable solutions to global problems. Currently, she is the Associate Director of Graduate Programs at the MIT Energy Initiative, as well as the founding director of Epistimi.

Diane and Janet connected in 2022 after Diane spoke on Zoom at the Association of MIT Alumnae (AMITA) Annual Meeting. Janet had participated in the meeting and emailed Diane to share her interest in supporting women academic leaders in STEMM fields. In this interview, Diane answers Janet's questions about Epistimi.

Janet: How would you describe the key aspects of Epistimi?

Diane: For me, the most important aspect of Epistimi is that program leaders and contributors are STEMM professionals engaged in leadership. Thus, we understand STEMM culture, both its strengths and weaknesses, from our own experience. Epistimi benefits from continuing engagement of women who have participated in the program and have embarked on their own scientific careers, often outside the U.S. They can return to Epistimi as trainers and prepare to run their own leadership workshops with our materials. Another innovative aspect of the Epistimi Program is that each participant brings a

leadership project or idea to the workshop. Ideally, this project or idea serves as the seed of that participant's leadership initiative and grows even beyond the workshop.

Janet: *How did you launch Epistimi?*

Diane: Epistimi has its origins in my own professional experience. I completed an MBA in 2005 and later attended a HERS leadership training program [3] for mid- to late career women in academia. In 2018, I joined the Boston Chapter of the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) and co-founded its Leadership Program [4]. In 2019, I co-founded the LEAdership and Professional Skills and Strategies (LEAPS) Program at MIT [5]. Then, in 2020, I began the process of creating Epistimi to bring the successful MIT LEAPS leadership program to early career STEMM professionals and graduate students identifying as women in the greater world outside MIT. With the generous help of volunteer attorneys, Epistimi was established as a nonprofit legal entity in 2021.

Janet: *How do you keep Epistimi going?*

Diane: Thus far, I have written a number of grants – we received our first small grant from a scientific foundation in May 2023! I feel that once the first couple of grants are funded, other organizations will be willing to fund Epistimi. I did discover that many organizations will not fund a nonprofit until it is three years old. Epistimi will be three in 2024 so hopefully there will be more opportunities then.

Janet: *What are the main accomplishments of Epistimi thus far?*

Diane: Although Epistimi is still very young, its predecessor programs show what accomplishments can be expected. Many graduates of the AWIS Boston Leadership Program have taken on leadership roles either in their workplaces or in the AWIS organization. One graduate even founded an organization similar to AWIS in her home country of Algeria (Algerian Women in Science), which recruited several hundred members in the first year of its founding. A postdoc who had participated in LEAPS in 2020 has been teaching the program in his home country of Jordan for the past three years. The program is so successful that they receive 1000 applications for the 45 available slots available each year. This program is offered to a mixed audience of men and women but with over 50% women.

Janet: *What do you see as the future of Epistimi?*

Diane: This summer, Epistimi offered its first in person leadership program at the American College of Greece in Athens (see photo). This first program will serve as a pilot to debug many of the challenges facing any new program and will also demonstrate the effectiveness of leadership training outside of the formal course format of LEAPS. In the next 10 years, I hope to have participants from all over the globe and trainers who are teaching the materials in their home countries. I hope that Epistimi's graduates will work together and achieve lasting impact in whatever they do. There is so much more that is possible in the future.

I am excited that Janet and Patricia have created a blog for Epistimi that is focused on senior women leaders. Younger women in STEMM can learn so much from the stories of more senior leaders. I hope the blog will bring a wide audience here to read about the challenges still facing women in STEMM no matter how high up the ladder they rise. This is a critical time in the history of our planet and scientifically trained leaders who can facilitate collaboration can help us make progress toward a net zero carbon future.

Janet: *How should readers contact you if they want to participate in or support Epistimi?*

Diane: Readers can send an email to epistimi.org@gmail.com, find news (and this blog) on our website Epistimi.org, and follow us on LinkedIn (@epistimi_STEMM) and Instagram (@epistimi_stemm).

Janet: Thank you Diane, for all this great information about Epistimi. Patricia and I thank you and the leadership team at Epistimi for agreeing to host this blog for senior women leaders. We look forward to working with you and watching Epistimi continue to grow its leadership program and support for women in STEMM.

In closing, here are a few questions for readers of the blog to stimulate further thought, discussion, and action:

- Have you participated in leadership training? If so, how does it compare with Epistimi?
- How do you think that you might benefit from leadership training?
- Do you have ideas for Epistimi? Share them with Diane (epistimi.org@gmail.com).

Notes, links, and references

[1] <https://tatacenter.mit.edu/team/angeliki-diane-rigos/>

[2] <https://www.epistimi.org/> (Epistimi is a 501(C)(3) nonprofit organization.)

[3] <https://www.hersnetwork.org/programs/hers-institute/>

[4] <https://massawis.org/leadership-program/>

[5] <https://physics.mit.edu/academic-programs/subjects/mitleaps/>