

# *SPEAKING UP AND SPEAKING LOUD:* ADVICE FROM BILITA MATTES

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**Women all over the world have navigated sometimes difficult professional paths to earn and secure positions of responsibility and leadership. This is especially true for women professionals in technology and science: industries that continue to face major challenges in gender parity and equity.**

Leading an initiative in support of women professionals in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) professions is Harrisburg University of Science and Technology's Bilita Mattes. She is an executive with over 30 years of higher education leadership experience and currently serves as Harrisburg's Provost and Chief Academic Officer and the Executive Director of the STEM-UP Network. As such, Mattes is responsible for all academic programs and services at the University.

"You don't wake up in your twenties and go 'I want be the Chief Academic Officer at a university someday.'" says Mattes when asked about her background. "It's been an amazing journey."

Mattes' father was the first in their family to attend college. He often expressed the importance of education to her. Growing up, Mattes saw her father as a role model, which led to her educational achievements and career in higher education and lifelong learning.

"I love working with HU's STEM students, staying real through the students and having an understanding of what gives them joy and what gives them pain," Mattes explains. "What challenges them, and what motivates them."

Dr. Mattes, along with other colleagues in Pennsylvania, created the STEM-UP Network, a community in support of women in STEM professions through programs, services, and a network that provide women with real-world strategies and relationships that help them advance and thrive both personally and professionally. This organization prioritizes connecting women and their allies with one another and cultivating an environment in which members can grow and advance as individuals and professionals in pursuit of gender equity in STEM. The STEM-UP Network is a social enterprise – an organization specifically developed to create positive social impact – powered by Harrisburg University.

The STEM-UP Network develops its programs and services in response to documented reasons as to why women leave their STEM professions. These programs provide leadership development, networking, and mentoring opportunities. Recent reports show that the issue of gender equity and parity in STEM professions will be further exacerbated by the pandemic.

"Research already [and prior to the pandemic] shows us that we lose 50% of the women who start in STEM professions in the first 10 to 12 years of that profession,"

explains Mattes. “And it’s for reasons that we can counteract such as how to navigate in a hostile work environment...gain the skills to negotiate, communicate, build networks, and build relationships that will help them be supported and advance.” How do you, for example, make a place for yourself at the table and have your voice heard when you are the only woman on a team? It is still not unusual, especially in STEM professions and especially in leadership positions, for a woman professional to be the only woman on a team.

Research further shows that gender disparity in STEM has a negative impact on the economy and competitiveness. Industry disparity in recruiting, retaining, and advancing women is costing the economy trillions of dollars according to some estimates and is exacerbating an already existing gap in the STEM workforce. “When you think of women in STEM, their ticket to the dance is their discipline skill and not their ability to negotiate a salary [or] negotiate and navigate a promotion,” she says. “There’s a solid business case behind striving for gender parity and equity. If over 70% of professions today require STEM skills, and 50% of your workforce, which are women, are underrepresented in those STEM positions, and then you lose another 50% of them.... You just have to do the math to see the problem and the opportunity. There’s a business imperative in the answer.”

Mattes explains that even experienced women in STEM professions who hold leadership positions often struggle with inequality. These women (and their male allies) work with Mattes to help conduct events through the STEM-UP Network to talk about some of the challenges they have faced and overcome in their careers and to share these stories with their colleagues with the goal of providing support to others in their personal and professional journeys and quests.

For example, through events like community forums, summits, conferences, and webinars, the STEM-UP Network is able to put together panels of senior female associates across multiple fields to help participants strategize and build skills that may help them thrive and advance in their STEM profession. These conversations, programs, and services, and Mattes alike, often stress the importance of support. The best thing women can do to



support one another and bring equity to the STEM field is to build an ever-expanding community and network. Through her experiences in the workforce, Mattes has learned that these relationships are integral to finding passion and success in a career. Even accomplished women require support from time to time from an encouraging community and a solid network of colleagues, like the STEM-UP Network. It is often this support that gives us the confidence to point to our achievements and to promote our ideas.

**What I tell women all the time is: get out of your own way. Don't second guess yourself. Say what you need to say. Be the person who shows confidence in what you have to contribute and don't hesitate to make the contribution.**

