

Student Engagement in Promotion of Women in Leadership

NOVEMBER 27, 2015 EDITOR

Students at Utah Valley University (UVU), members of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at UVU, successfully hosted the Fourth International Women of the Mountains Conference on October 7-9, 2015. It was the first time when UIMF was able to host such a high level event under the umbrella of the United Nations-related Mountain Partnership. I was honored to be a member of the student organizing committee and to contribute to the joint efforts as a co-moderator of the session on Women and Leadership.

I have been a part of the UIMF since two summers ago (August 2014) when I found out about the coalition of clubs through a class I took through Professor Baktybek Abdrisaev. So far being a part of UIMF has exceeded my expectations. Professor Abdrisaev has made an incredible program to help students get involved with promoting sustainable development in mountainous regions. As an extracurricular project, UIMF allowed me to be involved in different activities which raised an awareness among students in sustainable mountain development (SMD) agenda of the United Nations and how they could be part of that and improve their skills and experiences in international affairs and be recognized by the international community as well. All of that is very important for us after graduating UVU when we will decide how to continue our professional careers.

I contributed, for example, to the celebration of the International Mountain Day on December 11, 2014 by designing the poster which finalized the outcomes of the gathering and what UIMF did during 2014 to promote SMD in the State of Utah and in North America. Next spring I have been able to help UIMF to organize an essay contest in Utah high schools on topics of SMD agenda. I have gone around to different high schools in promoting an essay contest for the students. Part of UIMF's mission is to increase awareness of the problems going on worldwide pertaining to sustainable development. The essay contest accomplishes this goal as well as helping students to learn essential academic skills and having the possibility to be published in respected journals upon getting into the top three. In addition, they could grow up further as future leaders in promotion of SMD agenda.

I have met with several ambassadors accredited to the United Nations and United States who visited UVU. UIMF established an important tradition to arrange special meetings with those dignitaries in order for its members to learn diplomatic skills, establish contacts and inform VIP guests about their own contribution to the United Nations agenda. I gained so many experiences from the interactions with foreign guests.

UVU has established a great relationships with the United Nations agencies and with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO-UN) in particular. FAO-UN is

responsible for the implementation of the SMD agenda globally. As a result, UIMF has been able to pull in valuable foreign leaders to speak with the students about world issues. This has been a great networking and educational opportunity for myself and other students at UVU.



(L to R): Rosely Zamora and Christine Behle, co-moderators of the Women in Leadership Session.

These experiences helped prepare me to work as a member of the organizing committee of the Fourth International Women of the Mountains Conference, when UIMF leaders started preparations for hosting the forum at the beginning of 2015. The conference agenda included hosting women leaders from Utah, North America and around the world to speak about gender issues, farming issues, women in leadership, and many other issues relating to promoting sustainable development among mountain communities. I personally was in charge of the Women in Leadership session as a co-moderator together with my student colleague, Rosely Zamora. We worked closely with other members of the organizing committee and under the leadership of Deann Torsak, executive secretary of the conference. A couple of faculty assisted our efforts as advisors when we experienced certain questions or challenges in achieving our task.

Together Rosely and I were able to assemble a session which included presentations from several influential women such as Victoria Baird, co-director of U.N. Women in Utah; Dr. Susan Madsen, a leading scholar in Utah on Women in leadership issues; Morgan Cotti, Associate instructor at Hinckley Institute of Politics at University of Utah; Melissa Sevy, Founder and Executive Director of the NGO from Utah Musana; and Jeanetta Williams, President of the Salt Lake chapter of NAACP.



Victoria Baird, co-director of U.N. Women in Utah Speaks Before the Conference Audience

I personally felt very proud of the Women in Leadership session since UVU's numbers are down on how many women graduate from the university. Having strong women leaders are the types of role models that UVU students need to have. These women were very impressive and motivating that women, too, can change the world.

It was both a pleasure and honor for both of us to moderate such an important session and to learn from distinguished presenters how important to have more women as leaders in order to provide sustainable development for mountain communities worldwide. As part of our responsibilities we asked questions from presenters, addressed the audience to if they had questions for our distinguished guests. At the end we also summarized major recommendations from the participants in order to submit to the conference secretariat for the final document of the conference.

UMIF has really helped me have a lot of opportunities I wouldn't have been able to have otherwise. I'm grateful to have been a part of the organization and to learn so many important lessons and experiences both from activities with focus on promotion of SMD agenda of the United Nations and from my colleagues-students as part of mutual education of the UVU model of student engaged learning.

Christine Behle, co-moderator of the Women in Leadership Session.