

Women in HPC: Intersectionality BOF Report

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Abstract: *There are many groups that are under-represented in the HPC community, including women and African-Americans, but particularly poorly represented are those that fall into the intersection of two or more underrepresented groups. In this BOF, we hear the stories of women of different minority backgrounds in the HPC field, and the complex intersection between gender, race, sexual orientation and more, and how this has shaped their experience in HPC. We ask these women for their advice on making the HPC field more inclusive for people of all backgrounds.*

Beginning the BOF

For this BOF, we had three panelists:

- Dr. Jeanine Cook, Sandia National Laboratories,
- Dr. Kim Cupps, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory,
- Dr. Erika Parsons, University of Washington.

Before the session, we asked the panelists to consider the following questions:

- How has your experience in HPC, as a member of two or more underrepresented groups, differed from the experience of those who are members of only one of those groups?
- In what ways has being a member of one group informed your experience in the other?
- How does the community of women in HPC fall short in addressing your needs and issues in HPC, and what changes can we make to create a more welcoming environment for all?

The session began with each panelist giving an overview of her experience as an intersectional person in high-performance computing with an eye toward the questions we asked them to consider.

Jeanine Cook uses a wheelchair and is also Hispanic. Her disability has caused people to make certain assumptions about her, like that she's unable to travel to meetings, which excludes her. In her experience, the bias against disability means that she often can't even get a place at the table, both literally and figuratively.

Kim Cupps is a lesbian. Generally this is an invisible identity, which causes very different issues than Jeanine's visible identity. For example, people will assume that her spouse is male, or in one case, assume that she is her wife's son's wet nurse! She also talked about how as a new supervisor, she introduced herself to her staff and felt like she needed to inform them that she was gay. A straight person would never encounter this issue!

Erika Parsons is Hispanic and came to the US from Mexico to pursue a better education and better job opportunities, and hopefully to move away from misogyny. She had a very supportive and inclusive experience as a graduate student but unfortunately landed her first job in a dysfunctional group at Microsoft where she was belittled and excluded, both for being female and for being Hispanic. Now she is a professor and is very popular as an academic and personal advisor, especially to students from underrepresented groups.

Inclusivity at SC: What Can We Do?

The question was posed concerning what we can do to make SC more inclusive. The panelists and audience had some great suggestions.

- We need to find a way to educate people outside of underrepresented groups. The attendees of this BOF were primarily women, and they are already on board. Likewise, the men attending the BOF are more than likely allies already. We need to target those who aren't already aware of these issues or who aren't yet listening.
 - One suggestion was to intersperse talks on diversity onto the showroom floor, perhaps offering special swag if a person stays through the whole talk (like a lot of vendors do to keep you there to learn about a product).
- Affinity group lunches: at Grace Hopper (Women in Computing) conference, they had lunches for minority groups. Perhaps a better way to say this is "in honor of" minority groups, because for example at the Latinas lunch, more than half were not Latina. Likewise at the LGBT lunch there were straight allies in attendance as well. SC17 could do something similar early in the week, which would be a great way to get people talking.
- Make the code of conduct for the conference extremely clear. This was introduced just this year, and it would be good to make it required reading or otherwise be sure people understand and abide by the code of conduct.
- Create a map of accessible routes in the conference center. Conference centers tend to be built in phases and the pieces never end up fitting together well. Often there is a single elevator tucked into a far corner that is the only way to get to a particular floor. A map that shows accessible routes to the conference rooms would help disabled people attending the conference.

Finding and Shaping Allies

A common theme was that it can be difficult to find allies – people who may not have your same experience but are sympathetic and understand that you encounter bias as an underrepresented minority.

- Anyone with diverse people in their lives is likely to be an ally.
 - Often men who have wives with professional careers or daughters can be allies, because they learn about the experiences of the women in their lives and it opens their eyes.
 - People who are not gay themselves but have a gay child or relative are often sympathetic to LGBT issues.
- Working in a group it can quickly become obvious who your allies are. Develop those relationships by talking to them about things that are of mutual interest. You're not looking for people to meet your needs; you're looking for someone with whom you can have a give-and-take relationship grounded in fairness.
- Some people are inadvertently marginalizing.
 - Speak up about how you feel in a constructive manner.
 - Get an ally to support you and back up your claims.
- Some people don't want to learn or to give underrepresented groups a fair shake.
 - There are some incorrigible people and sometimes you need to move on, particularly if it is impacting your health or well-being.
 - Sometimes you can enlist the help of more sympathetic people to help with the less sympathetic ones.
 - Sometimes HR needs to intervene.

Overall Impressions and Next Steps

The session was unfortunately scheduled for only an hour, and the conversation was still lively at the very end when the group was being kicked out of the room for the next session.

Next steps include incorporating some of the feedback above into the SC17 program. The feedback on the BOF was overall very positive and we plan to hold another BOF on Women in HPC next year.