

Dr. Shimshon-Santo Is Giving Students a Leg Up on the Career Ladder



Dr. Amy Shimshon-Santo (WTS-LA Adopt-A-School Chair and Claremont Graduate University Professor) presenting at Transportation YOU Summit, Photos © John Livzey, 2017

It's an old conundrum. You can't get the job without experience and you can't gain experience without having the job. Imagine facing that challenge in today's highly sophisticated world if you're a high school student from an underserved area. It seems impossible. But 2016 WTS-LA Adopt-A-School Chair and Claremont Graduate University Professor Dr. Amy Shimshon-Santo has found a way to do the impossible.

"We worked with the International Trade Educational Programs ([ITEP](#)) to sponsor a workshop for their summer internship program. Open to incoming 12th grade students in Los Angeles, the workshop taught them skills they won't normally get anywhere else." The students are from the neighborhoods surrounding the port and they would become the first generation in their families to go to college. So they were very eager to hear about our backgrounds and how we got to where we are.



"We gathered in a boardroom at the Port of Los Angeles (POLA) and talked about our experiences. I told them about my own trajectory, being the first woman in my mom's family to complete college and the great value of being from an immigrant family. Many of the students are from immigrant families. And I talked to them about the WTS-LA scholarship application process, applying to college, essay writing, etcetera. For many students, this is a kind of guidance that is hard to obtain anywhere else."

The workshop brought together Shimshon-Santo, ITEP internship program manager Christiana Faulkner, 10 ITEP educators, and WTS-LA Adopt-A-School Committee member and POLA civil engineer Mahsa Hematabadi Pan, PE. They joined 100 students in a dynamic workshop that presented vital information and taught soft skills in very effective ways. ITEP's Faulkner explains.

"When the program started, we had students give testimonials about where they were interning and what they've been doing. They're all interning in different places, so that was really helpful. Even the shy kids

got up and spoke, and they talked about challenges and things that were worth celebrating at their internships.



“Then we broke into groups and the students brainstormed on air quality, public parks, water, and transportation. They came up with ideas about major challenges, what they could change and how. The great thing was that the students weren’t limited in their responses. They weren’t coached by anyone either, so it was all *their* thinking. We had two groups for each topic, and we had the groups share their findings. It was awesome to hear the different ideas. We work with more than 14 different academies, so being able to break up into different groups where students from different academies could work together was really good exposure for them. It was great to see them mingling and working with students they don’t go to school with

every day.”



Next Pan gave an educational and entertaining PowerPoint presentation on her experience becoming a civil engineer and working at POLA. By all accounts, it presented highly valuable information in an easily consumable form for the students.

“I discussed how I became an engineer and how I got where I am. My theme was, *Careers, Education, & Pathways*. I focused on practical advice on how to pursue goals in transportation while still in high school, like getting good grades, practicing public speaking, and learning to work in groups. Then I talked about what they could do in college and I gave specific tips. Then I explained the port’s role in the transportation

industry and goods movement, to give them context. I also showed them that to make the port function, we require all different disciplines, from IT to graphic design. I wanted to make them aware that transportation encompasses many different disciplines.

“The students all participated, and I think they found it beneficial. I thought it was very helpful to bring them all together, too. They’re all at different locations, so the students don’t know what each other is doing at their respective jobs. I thought it was nice for them to stand up in front of their peers. It was a great chance for them to speak publicly. They don’t really get that chance very much and it’s very important. And this was a safe environment for them to do that.”

Faulkner agrees. And she credits both Pan and Shimshon-Santo for their innovative ways to reach out to the students.

“Working with Amy and Mahsa was really refreshing. They were such collaborative spirits and they had great ideas. And we were on all the same page about how to interact with the students. We intentionally did *not* give them a lot of direction. We wanted them to think for themselves and not limit them. And they delivered. They came up with great ideas, ideas that were particular to where they lived and their experience. Given that most of them live near the port, many of them faced similar issues on a personal level. So it was great to see them collaborate and develop out-of-the-box ideas to address those issues.”

Shimshon-Santo agrees.

“They were so creative and innovative. The real thing that drives people—particularly young people—to make a difference is how to make the world better. We gave them real world dilemmas to solve and they

ran with it. And it was a much more profound learning experience. But that's what WTS-LA's Adopt-A-School Program is all about. We partner strategically with educational organizations, like ITEP, that can provide specific kinds of experiences that can enhance and expand services for young people. We connect real people with real expertise to students. There were no platitudes or clichés. We wanted to hear what they think and support them as young leaders. And that's what we did."