The Power of PLEN
40 Years of History and Impact
PLEN is the only national organization with the sole focus of preparing college women for leadership in the policy arena. Our mission is to increase the number of women in policy leadership positions who influence all aspects of the decision-making process.
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Letter from the Executive Director

October 2018
Dear friends,

What a great milestone we’ve reached. PLEN is 40 and it’s time to celebrate! We’re thrilled to have friends, faculty, students, and sponsors join us as we look back at PLEN’s beginnings, some of our successes, and stories of our past. What follows isn’t just a nostalgia tour. It’s a celebration of PLEN’s impact — past and present — and a peek at what the future holds.

No nonprofit organization survives 40 years without the contributions of multiple people making the dream a reality. In our case, thousands of students, faculty, and administrative staff at well over 200 schools; countless members of the board of directors and advisory council; and scores of former and present staff and interns have worked tirelessly at PLEN from the first days in 1978 to present. Without these women and men, there would be no PLEN. Thank you to everyone who has worked on campuses and in a succession of PLEN offices here in Washington, DC, to bring PLEN to life.

Staff, students, and academic faculty don’t tell the full story. PLEN has also relied on hundreds of foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and individuals to support our programs here and abroad. We are thankful to them and to all the speakers and mentors — including countless elected officials and staff — who have volunteered their time and talents to bring the best of politics and policy education to PLEN students.

PLEN has welcomed college women to Washington, DC (and, in the early days, on their college campuses), to learn from the best and brightest women leaders in policy. Our theme for this celebration — confidence, leadership, and connection — is what PLEN gives and what students take back to their campuses.

Our alumnae have found success in graduate programs from public health to law to business school. They are serving in government in every role from Senior Attorney at the Department of Justice to Chief of Staff on Capitol Hill. They are in state houses as elected representatives and staffing local mayoral offices. Looking for a PLEN alumna? She may be the executive director of a corporate foundation; a political appointee; teaching on a college campus (or there as a dean); or leading a nonprofit, trade association, or corporation. The collective achievements of our alumnae tell the PLEN success story better than any single accomplishment ever could.

Beyond policy and tactical employment skills, PLEN teaches the power of networking, instills confidence, and plants the seeds of possibility in our students. We create leaders.

This is our story. This is the power of PLEN.

Sarah Bruno
Executive Director
### Timeline

**PLEN History**

- **1978:** PLEN is founded by Wells College president Frances Tarlton “Sissy” Farenthold with the help of Ruth Mandel of the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) and Betsey Wright of the National Women’s Education Fund (NWEF).

- **1980–1982:** A grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York supports PLEN’s expansion and encourages the organization to move in new directions.

- **1983:** The first Women in Public Policy seminar is held in Washington, DC.

- **1986:** PLEN names Marianne Alexander its first executive director.

- **1988:** PLEN moves to Washington, DC and officially becomes an independent 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

- **1989:** The first Women and Congress and Women, Law, and Legal Advocacy seminars are held in Washington, DC.

- **1990:** PLEN receives Kellogg Grant to support a Women in Public Policy Internship Program.

- **1991:** PLEN partners with the Center for American Women and Politics to offer the first NEW Leadership program at Douglass Residential College at Rutgers University.

- **1992:** Advisory Board formed.

- **1993:** PLEN travels to Europe for a seminar on Women and European Public Policy in London, Brussels, Strasbourg, and Berlin.

**Women’s History**

- **1970**
  - **1972:** Shirley Chisholm is the first African American woman to seek the presidential nomination for a major party (the Democrats).

- **1972:** Congress passes Title IX, which prohibits discrimination against girls and women in federally-funded educational programs.

- **1978:** Congress passes the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which bans employment discrimination against women who are pregnant.

- **1980**
  - **1981:** Sandra Day O’Connor is the first woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court.

- **1982:** The Equal Rights Amendment, proposed to guarantee equal legal rights for citizens regardless of sex, fails to be ratified by the states.

- **1984:** Geraldine Ferraro runs for vice-president of the Democratic Party, the first woman on the ticket for a major party.

- **1987:** Congress declares March as Women’s History Month.

- **1988:** Lenora Fulani is the first African American independent and the first female presidential candidate on the ballot in all 50 states.

- **1989:** Ileana Ros-Lehtinen becomes the first Latina woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

- **1990**
  - **1991:** Anita Hill testifies on Capitol Hill, bringing light to the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace.

- **1992:** “The Year of the Woman” — A record number of women are elected to the Senate, including Carol Moseley Braun, the first female African American Senator.

- **1993:** Ruth Bader Ginsberg is appointed to the Supreme Court; Janet Reno is the first woman to serve as Attorney General.

- **1994:** The Violence Against Women Act passes Congress and is signed into law for the first time.
1994: The first annual Mentor Awards is held, honoring Betsy Crone, Constance Morella, Constance Newman, Helen Norton, Antonia Coello Novello, and Claudia Withers.

The first Women in International Policy seminar is held in Washington, DC.

1995: PLEN students attend UN Conference on Women in Beijing.
PLEN creates an associate member category for co-educational institutions.

1998: In conjunction with Wells College, PLEN holds a program in Seneca Falls, NY to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the first women’s rights convention.

1995: Hillary Clinton addresses the UN Conference on Women and makes the now famous statement “Women’s rights are human rights.”

1997: Madeleine Albright is the first woman to serve as Secretary of State.

2000: PLEN holds the first Women in Science/Technology Policy seminar in January and launches a new workplace diversity internship.

2001: Ruth Simmons becomes president of Brown University, the first African American to serve as president of an Ivy League institution.

2005: Condoleezza Rice is the first African American woman to serve as Secretary of State.

2004: PLEN celebrates 25 years.

2006: PLEN launches online alumnae networking tools through Facebook and MySpace.

2007: PLEN convenes the Corporate Advisory Council, with members representing industries from oil and gas to financial services to pharmaceuticals.

2000:

2001:

2004:

2006:

2007:

2008: Activist and, at the time, youth worker, Tarana Burke begins the me too Movement™.

2009: Sonya Sotomayor is appointed to the Supreme Court.

2010: Elena Kagan is appointed to the Supreme Court.

2013: Mazie Hirono becomes the first Asian American woman to serve as Secretary of State.

2016: Hillary Clinton becomes the first woman to be nominated for President by a major political party.

2017: #MeToo movement is popularized on social media, again drawing attention to the ongoing issue of sexual harassment in the workplace.

2018: Stacey Abrams becomes the first black woman nominee for governor.

2014: PLEN hosts a Human Rights and Trafficking seminar for Douglass Residential College students.

2017: PLEN partners with the Center for American Women and Politics, IGNITE, Running Start, She Should Run, VoteRunLead, Women in Government Relations, Women in Public Service Project, and others for #NewWomen Members, an event that celebrated the women newly elected to Congress.

2010: First alumnae leadership award given to Kristin Haffert.

2013: St. Lawrence University becomes the first non-women’s college or former non-women’s college to join PLEN.
The Beginnings

In 1937, nearly 20 years after women earned the right to vote and run for office, only 33% of Americans said that they would vote for a woman if she were running for president.¹

By 1978, 80% of Americans agreed that they would cast their ballot for a qualified woman candidate to be the leader of the United States, and yet, only a handful of women had been successful on the national political stage.
Democrat Shirley Chisholm, Libertarian Tonie Nathan, and Socialist Linda Jenness had made unsuccessful bids for the presidency. Women composed just 4% of Congress: 16 women in the House and one in the Senate. Only two women were serving as state governors: Ella T. Grass in Connecticut and Dixy Lee Ray in Washington. There were 35 women holding seats in statewide elected office.

With so few role models, it is no surprise that just 12% of college women in the 1970s considered influencing the political structure as an important personal objective and fewer than 40% of college students viewed keeping up with political affairs as essential or very important.

Women’s college leaders in the 1970s saw an opportunity to change the status quo and empower their students to pursue public leadership roles. In 1976, Frances “Sissy” Farenthold, President of Wells College, drafted a proposal to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for financial support of a consortium of higher education institutions dedicated to educating college women for leadership in public policy — she called it the Public Leadership Education Network (now better known as PLEN). Sissy partnered with Ruth Mandel, the Director of the Center for American Women and Politics, and Betsey Wright, Executive Director of the National Women’s Education Fund.

PLEN began as a consortium consisting of five women’s colleges along the East Coast: Spelman College (Atlanta, Georgia), Stephens College (Columbia, Missouri), Carlow College (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), Goucher College (Towson, Maryland) and Wells College (Aurora, New York). By design, Sissy wanted PLEN to include smaller, diverse institutions that had traditionally been under-resourced.

Reflecting on what motivated her to launch PLEN, Farenthold spoke to a group gathered in Washington, DC, to celebrate the organization’s 35th anniversary. As a legislator in the Texas State House, she noted that the pages in the gallery were all boys. “Where are the girls?” she asked herself. Through her years as a legislator, gubernatorial candidate, and founding

Frances “Sissy” Farenthold

Frances “Sissy” Farenthold was a Texas state legislator, women’s college president, human rights activist — and the driving force behind PLEN’s founding in the late 1970s. An alumna of Vassar College and the University of Texas-Austin School of Law, Sissy served in the Texas legislature from 1968 and ran for governor in 1972. Though she lost the gubernatorial race, Sissy gained national recognition, and as a result, was encouraged to run for the Democratic Vice-Presidential nomination — the first woman to do so. In 1976, Sissy became the president of Wells College and led the charge to form PLEN in the late 70s. Sissy continued to support PLEN after leaving Wells College and continued her work in the public sector as an international human rights activist.
president of the National Women’s Political Caucus — and as the women’s movement heated up — Sissy kept in mind the absence of girls in the most basic of political roles.

Getting off the Ground

The five founding institutions served students on each campus in similar, yet varied, ways. Wells College introduced college women to leaders who were making a difference in the public policy arena at interactive campus conferences. Stephens College recruited a woman leader to serve as a politician-in-residence who co-taught with a faculty member for a semester. Goucher College sponsored students who worked as interns with women members of the Maryland General Assembly. Carlow College ran a series of continuing education workshops for women running for office. Spelman College developed interdisciplinary academic courses on black women in politics.
Early Days in DC

Campus-based programs had worked well in the early iteration of PLEN, but network leaders quickly realized that women needed access to the nation’s seat of power.

With increased support from the Carnegie Corporation, PLEN welcomed three new member schools: Alverno College, Douglass College at Rutgers University, and Marymount Manhattan College and launched its first Washington, DC-based program, the Women in Public Policy seminar in 1983.
Establishing an Independent PLEN

PLEN’s first Washington, DC program coincided with the anticipated ending of the Carnegie Corporation funding. In 1984, PLEN convened an annual meeting of faculty and administrators for focused work on the future of women’s collegiate leadership development programs. Looking internally, PLEN wanted to improve programs by taking content in new directions, providing regular DC-based programs throughout the academic year, connecting college women to work experiences as undergraduates, or by introducing a public policy graduate internship program for alumnae of PLEN colleges.

From the beginning, one goal of the organization was to increase the participation of women of color in public leadership, and thus each PLEN member school launched a Women of Color Initiative. Other projects included a partnership with the Center for Women Policy Studies and a directory of Women of Color Mentors. This legacy continues in PLEN’s current work, as today over 50% of PLEN are women of color, including 20% who are Latinx.

In 1986, PLEN began collecting annual membership contributions to respond to the changing needs of its diverse institutional constituency. The Presidents of PLEN’s member schools created the executive director position and selected Goucher professor and PLEN coordinator Marianne Alexander to serve as the first leader of the organization. Two years later, PLEN college presidents and other representatives gathered for a Wingspread Conference in Chicago and created PLEN’s mission statement.

Cori Asaka

Cori Asaka, an alumna of Wells College, attended the first Women in Public Policy seminar in 1983. As a student with family from the Washington, DC area, she was familiar with the city, but she had not yet considered public policy as a potential career path. During the seminar, Cori recalled meeting Barbara Bush, who was then the Second Lady, and attending a Supreme Court hearing on the Hill. She remembered discovering the diversity of policy careers, including those within government and the private sector. Cori’s interest in public policy and politics was piqued by her PLEN experience. As a student, Cori advocated for reparations for Japanese Americans, including her father’s family, who had been interred during World War II, with the Japanese American Citizens League. After graduation, she returned to the Washington, DC area where she has worked in the IT and national security sectors for nearly 30 years. Cori’s roles in implementing homeland security initiatives required her to have significant knowledge of the laws and policies that impact the public and speak to the multiple avenues by which women can participate in public policy across sectors.

“Women still undervalue themselves...even the most qualified and most powerful. PLEN can put women in front of young women and teach them that ‘it’s your mind that’s of value.’”
When a student walks into a PLEN seminar, she’ll see participants who reflect the diversity of the population. This is the true beauty of PLEN. A room full of smart, eager students who, together, look like they’ve just walked in from the United Nations. Over half of the women who attend self-identify as a member of at least one group traditionally underrepresented in policy leadership (by ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, family educational background, or socio-economic status). You might say that PLEN is ahead of its time, reflecting the future when minorities will be the majority. Now that’s leadership!

“This program really broke down the walls to what I believe it means to be a woman in STEM policy. I realize now that while there are a lot of barriers to be broken for women, and especially women of color, it is up to me to break down these walls.”

— Isabel Gomez, Smith College (Women in STEM Policy 2018)
Marianne Alexander, PhD

Marianne Alexander, PhD, was PLEN’s first executive director and over the course of PLEN’s 40-year history, served as a leader and advocate for the organization. Marianne earned her PhD in American Studies from the University of Maryland College Park and was serving as an assistant professor of political science at Goucher College when PLEN was established. After leading Goucher’s campus-based PLEN programs, including a meeting for women legislators in the state of Maryland and a policy internship program, Marianne was selected as the executive director in 1986 and led the effort to establish PLEN as an independent non-profit in Washington, DC in the late 1980s. Throughout the 1990s, Marianne’s passion for and commitment to young women’s leadership development was the force that allowed PLEN to thrive in Washington. She played an invaluable role in the lives of many young women as they got their start here. Marianne currently serves as the President Emerita of the PLEN Board of Directors.

Launching New Seminars

At the beginning of 1989, PLEN made its Washington, DC presence official by moving into new office space in the city. In January 1989, the forerunner to today’s Women, Law, & Legal Advocacy seminar kicked off. Speakers and advisors from the first Washington seminar helped expand the program offerings. The Women and Congress seminar followed closely. Membership expanded to 14 members, including the College of St. Benedict, Hood College, Sweet Briar College, and Trinity College of Vermont.
Lisa Kaenzig, PhD

Lisa Kaenzig, PhD, current Dean of William Smith College and Immediate Past Chair of the PLEN Board of Directors, attended the first Women and Congress seminar as an undergraduate at Douglass Residential College at Rutgers University. Lisa entered college knowing that she wanted to run a woman’s political campaign — and knowing that PLEN was one way to achieve her goals.

The active PLEN chapter at Douglass College offered multiple opportunities for new students like Lisa to connect with more senior women students. Through the Center for American Women and Politics, Lisa learned from women legislators about how to successfully navigate political life. In Washington, Lisa attended PLEN’s Women and Congress seminar in 1989, followed by the Women in Public Policy seminar in 1990 and a second Women and Congress seminar in 1992.

She moved to Washington a few days after her college graduation and worked for the Women’s Campaign Fund, the National Governor’s Association, and the Women’s Information Network before earning her M.A. at George Washington University and her Ph.D. at the College of William and Mary. Throughout her many PLEN experiences, Lisa remembered hearing from several notable women speakers, including a young Mary Landrieu (D-LA), who would go on to be a U.S. Senator, and Judy Schneider, a specialist on Congress with the Congressional Research Service in the Library of Congress. She said the biggest lessons she learned through these experiences was that young women needed to find a way to have their own voice in leadership and the critical importance of women supporting other women.

“Young women need to see themselves in leadership roles and hear from people with different political perspectives.”

In a recent alumnae survey, 4 out of 5 respondents said they credit PLEN with helping them gain confidence and deciding on a certain career path.

For 80% of them, networking skills were the biggest take away. Almost half of respondents learned how to better communicate with those who don’t agree with them.
Breaking Barriers

America renewed its focus on women’s political participation in the 1990s after a record-breaking number of women won Congressional seats in 1992. Meanwhile, PLEN established itself in Washington, DC as one of the leading organizations for training the next generation of women public policy leaders.
By the mid-1990s, membership increased to 18 colleges across the country. Original members Carlow College, Stephens College, and Wells College remained in the network, while new members such as Agnes Scott College, College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Newcomb College at Tulane University, and William Woods University joined the fold. As word spread about PLEN, the program scope also grew to include new traditions and areas of emphasis.

In the 1980s, PLEN experienced success in giving students short-term opportunities to visit Washington, DC and see what the policy world was like. In 1991, the organization launched a semester-long, immersive internship for students of PLEN member schools to gain real-world professional experience in Washington, DC. What differentiated PLEN’s internship program from others at the time was its distinct focus on connecting young women to women leaders in the field. Students worked on the Hill, in the federal government, or at non-profits in issue areas relevant to their career interests and then met weekly with other women students and PLEN staff to reflect on their experiences and develop their professional networks. In other words, PLEN offered women students a supportive, empowered environment in which to hone their career interests in what was still very much a male-dominated field — long before internships became the norm for most college students.

**Going Global**

PLEN expanded its global presence in the 1990s with several seminars that connected students to women leaders in international policy and foreign relations. Building on the success of a pilot seminar in Great Britain in 1989, PLEN launched the first international policy trip in 1993 with the Women and European Public Policy seminar. During this two-week program, students traveled to Great Britain, Belgium, and Germany, where they met with women parliamentary leaders, networked with women faculty studying women’s political participation abroad, and engaged in discussion about the issues facing women in Western Europe.

Jona Van Deun participated in the inaugural Women in Public Policy Internship Program in 1991. She heard about PLEN through her school, the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph’s, Minnesota. At St. Benedict’s, women who wanted to attend PLEN in Washington, DC were selected through a competitive application process, and meanwhile, Jona had also applied to an internship at the White House under George H.W. Bush. To her surprise, she got into PLEN and received the internship and from there, she headed to Washington and never looked back. As a PLEN student, Jona remembered meeting with multiple women senators, including Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS), Olympia Snow (R-ME), Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Barbara Boxer (D-CA), and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), who shared their career successes and mistakes. Jona recalled that PLEN Executive Director Marianne Alexander always made sure that students heard from women who had different perspectives on the issues, a critical learning experience for Jona. Since attending PLEN, Jona continued her career in public policy, including positions with the White House, RNC, Koch Industries, and the US Chamber of Commerce. She is currently a member of PLEN’s Board of Directors.

43% of PLEN alumnae influence policy in their day-to-day work.
With the success of the European trip, PLEN launched several other international seminars for students. Most notably, students attended an NGO forum held in conjunction with the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women. There, they witnessed First Lady Hillary Clinton’s now famous speech, where she argued that “women’s rights are human rights” and brought to light women’s issues on the world stage. Alumna Christine Turner attended the trip as a Tulane undergraduate student and recalled that the conference “opened her eyes to the world of international affairs, geopolitics, and the UN system.” Inspired by her PLEN experience, Christine — now the lead of Global Policy at WhatsApp — went on to pursue positions in international affairs including a role with the National Security Council in the Obama administration.

PLEN’s international presence continued through the 90s to today, including multiple PLEN alumnae receiving prestigious international fellowships such as the Hansard Society Scholars Programme and the Fulbright Scholarship. The Women in Global Policy seminar has become one of the most highly attended seminars each year.

**Honoring Mentors**

In February, 1994, PLEN alumnae Stacie Hagenbaugh and Lisa Kaenzig helped organize the first annual Mentor Awards in conjunction with the 15th Anniversary Celebration to recognize the many women who had contributed to PLEN programs since the organization was established. Honorees included members of Congress, policy leaders in the government, private, and nonprofit sectors. Today, the Mentor Awards is held annually, with many awardees continuing to serve as speakers and supporters of the organization.
New Directions for the New Millennium

Later in the 90s, PLEN seized the opportunity to honor its historical predecessors in the women’s rights movement. In 1998, students and faculty from PLEN member schools traveled to New York to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention, where noted abolitionists Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton launched the American women’s suffrage movement in 1848. That same year, PLEN started to advocate for the increased participation of women in STEM careers by launching the Women in Science/Technology Policy seminar. The seminar was, in many ways, groundbreaking: students connected with women who were leading labs at the National Institutes for Health, overseeing multi-million dollar grant programs at the National Science Foundation, and advising Congress on important issues such as the environment and healthcare. PLEN showed young women scientists the multiple ways that their work could have an impact on policy. Today, our

“As someone who has always been motivated by the ‘bigger picture,’ I often found it difficult to visualize the role of STEM in the grand scheme of things. Attending this year’s Women in STEM Policy seminar has definitely changed the way I think about science.”

— Oluwaseyi Olojo, Barnard College (Women in STEM Policy 2016)
Women in STEM Policy seminar shows women the continued relevance of STEM diversity in today’s context, covering topics like cybersecurity, emerging energy technology, and the latest medical breakthroughs.

As the 21st century began, PLEN experienced staff changes as well as expansion. Marianne Alexander, who had served as PLEN’s executive director for nearly 15 years, passed the reigns to Liz Swanson, who had previously served as the PLEN Coordinator for Douglass Residential College. PLEN also added a new staff position to support year-round program development, while the Board of Directors expanded to include non-member college presidents. In 2005, PLEN created the Corporate Advisory Council to support programming and fundraising efforts, forging ties between PLEN and women in advocacy roles from some of the top corporations in the country.

Finally, despite the decline in the number of women’s colleges across the country, PLEN grew to 19 member schools. PLEN also began to expand its recruitment of students from non-member institutions, resulting in record enrollment over 200 students in 2003. Today, six seminars draw over 275 women representing more than 60 colleges and universities each year.

Jen Knieriem

As a senior at Hood College, Jen Knieriem had a strong interest in social justice and the non-profit sector, but little direction about where such interests could lead in terms of a career. PLEN’s semester internship program proved to be the place where she learned how she could make a difference in the world. Jen interned at the Center for Policy Alternatives and, through weekly seminars with PLEN staff and fellow interns, Jen’s network grew and gave her the confidence to realize that she also could forge a career in Washington, DC. She remembered meeting Mona Cadena, then an organizer for Amnesty International, and being inspired by the scope and magnitude of the issues on which Mona worked. After completing her degree, Jen launched her career in Washington, DC with PLEN, developing programs for college women who, like her, were searching for meaningful careers. She subsequently worked with the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and is on the Board of Associates for her alma mater, Hood College.

“PLEN helps college women discover and grow the tools and skills they will need to have a successful career, while also peeling back a layer of Washington, DC so they can see how many ways there are to make a difference in a way that’s important to you.”
Member Schools

On college campuses, PLEN’s member schools have always been the foundation of the organization, with strong traditions and a highly competitive application process on many campuses.
Maryam Laly

Maryam Laly learned about PLEN from her best friend and alumna of the program who attended PLEN member school Mount Holyoke College. She came to the Women in Global Policy seminar at a pivotal time in her college career, while she was choosing her major and in need of mentors who could help guide her decision. Maryam recalled connecting with many women in international relations and foreign affairs whose careers inspired her. Keynote speaker Pamela Reeves, a former director of the State Department’s International Fund for Women and Girls, made a particular impression. Reeves’ experience working in women’s empowerment in Afghanistan, Maryam’s home country, inspired Maryam to pursue an undergraduate thesis on the women’s rights movement in Afghanistan and solidified her decision to major in Government with minors in Peace Studies and Arabic.

Maryam also recalled the strong sense of community among the students who attended PLEN, each of whom brought their own interests and passions for global issues to the conference. When she returned to St. Lawrence University after attending the seminar, Maryam knew that other students at her college would likewise benefit from PLEN. With her advocacy and support from Lynn Fox, St. Lawrence University became the first non-women’s college or former non-women’s college to join PLEN in 2013.

Some member schools (Hobart and William Smith Colleges, St. Lawrence University, and Douglass Residential College at Rutgers University) have active PLEN chapters that host regular events on campus. This year Hobart and William Smith Colleges will even have a PLEN themed residential house! Other schools (Newcomb College Institute of Tulane University and Mount St. Mary’s University) do not have formal PLEN chapters but send large numbers of students to seminars throughout the year.

While two-thirds of students who attend PLEN seminars are from member schools, there are the students who find out about PLEN via word-of-mouth, social media, or professors familiar with the program. Scholarships — either on campus or directly from PLEN — are available to allow women from every socioeconomic level to attend PLEN’s programs.

“*I think more than ever there is such a huge need for PLEN. Not only because of the quality of seminars and quality of mentorship, but just by the sheer existence of an organization that is meant to empower women to shape the lives of women in the US and around the world.”*
Donya Khadem came to PLEN with a clear set of post-graduation career goals: she wanted to get some experience in the policy world before attending law school. A Washington, DC-based mentor referred her to PLEN, but before attending as a senior, she had to lobby her University of Wisconsin political science department to fund her experience. With their support, she headed to DC in 2015 for the Women, Law, and Legal Advocacy seminar. She recalled going into the seminar very stressed: she knew it was going to be difficult to get the policy job that she wanted. PLEN’s community of women, both students and speakers, gave her the support and encouragement that she needed a critical time. Donya recalled building her confidence on how to negotiate her salary, a practice with which she had little prior experience. Ultimately, Donya leveraged the skills and network gained during her PLEN seminar to land the DC job she wanted. She worked in both the non-profit and government sectors for two years before pursuing her dream of law school. Donya is currently a third-year law student at the University of Michigan.

“There is a need to have strong networks of women to teach you to advocate for yourself in the workplace, now in particular around the #MeToo movement, and especially for women of color. PLEN does a great job finding diverse women to serve as mentors.”

“We are the future WOMEN leaders we’re looking for, so it’s time to get to work.”

— Chi Ali, Old Dominion University (Women in Public Policy 2017)
Where PLEN Students Come From

Over 4,000 Students from 300 Colleges & Universities in 46 States
### PLEN Member Schools Over the Years

1. Agnes Scott College
2. Alverno College
3. Augustana College*
4. Barnard College
5. Bennett College
6. Carlow College*
7. Cedar Crest College*
8. Chatham University*
9. College of New Rochelle
10. College of Notre Dame of Maryland
11. College of St. Benedict*
12. College of St. Catherine*
13. College of St. Elizabeth
14. Columbia College
15. Columbia College of South Carolina
16. Douglass Residential College, Rutgers University*
17. Goucher College*
18. Hollins University
19. Hood College*
20. Luther College*
21. Marymount Manhattan College
22. Mount Holyoke College*
23. Mount St. Mary’s University*
24. Mount Vernon College
25. Newcomb College Institute at Tulane University*
26. Pine Manor College
27. Randolph Macon Woman’s College
28. Scripps College*
29. Smith College*
30. Spelman College*
31. St. Lawrence University*
32. Stephens College*
33. Sweet Briar College
34. Texas Woman’s University*
35. Trinity College
36. Trinity College of Vermont
37. Wells College*
38. Wesleyan College
39. William Smith College, Hobart and William Smith Colleges*
40. Wilson College*
41. Williams Woods University
PLEN Alumnae: Going Strong

At the end of a PLEN seminar, students are struck by how much they’ve learned, the leaders they’ve met, and the connections they’ve made.

Beyond discovering new career possibilities, policy areas, and specific job skills, they are amazed at how much more confident they are, how much more risk they’re willing to take, and how much fun they can have while building their own, individual career paths.
From the beginning, PLEN alumnae have gone onto do incredible things. They hold top policy positions in a variety of fields across all sectors at the federal, state, and local levels, including...

PLEN is unique in our commitment to presenting voices and opinions from across the political spectrum; this is reflected at every level of our organization. We curate panels that include speakers from the EMILY’s List to the RNC, and from Koch Industries to the ACLU. We encourage students to respectfully engage with those who may have a different viewpoint than their own because we know this is a foundational attribute of the most successful leaders.

“At the PLEN seminar, for the first time in years, I sat and truly heard people from the opposite side of the political spectrum. And surprisingly, I could agree with them on a lot of things.”

— Marina Feldman, Rutgers University (Women in Public Policy 2017)

### Why PLEN? Why Now?

Since PLEN was founded, there has been positive progress in many areas of women’s public leadership. In the executive branch, we have seen women make competitive bids for the presidency and vice presidency. In 2018, women made up 19.8% of Congress and held 22.8% of seats in statewide executive offices. Women make up over 25% of state legislatures and 20% of mayoral roles in the 100 largest American cities. But there is still a long way to go before women achieve parity. When compared to other countries, 86 nations have a higher percentage of women in parliament than the US. And, while experiencing positive progress in recent years, women of color remain even more significantly underrepresented in political leadership roles at the local, state, and national level.
Outside of politics, there are other indicators that gender equality remains a pressing issue across sectors. Women are the majority of college students yet only 30% of college presidents are women. Only 32 women lead Fortune 500 companies — just 6.4%. Women earn around 20% less than men, accounting for equal levels of education, and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) anticipates the pay gap will not close until 2119. The question that Sissy Farenthold posed at PLEN’s founding is still all too relevant: “Where are all the women?”

Whether these stats will change significantly over the next several years remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: the need for PLEN has never been greater. As students come to Washington, DC, with a sense of adventure, open-mindedness, and an eagerness to learn, PLEN gives them a sense of what is possible. We welcome them and introduce them to countless women leaders eager to help them navigate their career paths. We build a pipeline of diverse leaders who will be poised to solve the most complicated policy issues facing our country.
As long as there are glass ceilings to be broken and women who dream of breaking them, PLEN will continue to carry out our mission.
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About the Authors

Dawn Culpepper, M.Ed.
University of Maryland

Lisa D. T. Rice, S.M.
Vice Chair, PLEN Board of Directors
Chair, 40th Anniversary Committee
Endnotes


