

My time at the American Association for the Advancement of Science Meeting 2016 YCA ^[1]

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Just before the YCA Workshop 2016

During mid-semester, on November 2015, I was working around my schedule to get through essays and tests for completion of the Psychology doctorate degree. But, around November my father told me about an announcement for an academic growth and development program opportunity that had opened up. The Yale Ciencia Academy program for minority students was accepting applications and it was organized by CienciaPR.org, a website that had caught my attention a few years ago. CienciaPR.org is an initiative to get together Hispanic students from

any level with the purpose of creating an online community with the main focus being science. The Yale Ciencia Academy program, on the other hand, is intended to give accepted students a series of mentoring sessions with other Hispanic professionals who have achieved a desirable career position in the field of science.

After looking at the advertisement on the newspaper, a few weeks passed. Me being between tests and essays I really couldn't find the time to fill up the application and write a letter of motivation to participate in the program. So, when I finished with all the university work I went on to the site where the application deadline had been extended and applied. On the next weeks, I was enjoying my vacations and visiting different places on the island (Puerto Rico). On one of the trips we stopped at Casa Pueblo where I saw and bought the ¡Ciencia Boricua! book which is sponsored by CienciaPR.org and has a lot of interesting facts about the sciences in Puerto Rico that I did not know about. So I got it and read the first few chapters and then talked about it with my father during a holiday family dinner.

A few days later to my surprise I received an email. I remember it said "Congratulations you've been selected to participate in the Yale Ciencia Academy 2016 program!" but my reaction was way different than I would've expected. I think I was so blown away that I couldn't grasp what was going on; also I was driving while I read the message. I looked at my friend who is also a Neuroscientist and told her: "ohh, cool it looks like I've been accepted to the Yale Science Academy program from CienciaPR.org..." but she looked at me with a glare and told me "you should start getting prepared!" So we went on that day to the beach and talked about the opportunities that this program could set me up for and how I should take it as an opportunity to collaborate and get to know more people with the same interests as I have.

A few days later, the administrators of the program scheduled an online meeting to get the all the fellows to meet each other and discuss important aspects about what the program is about. They talked about how we were going to receive mentoring from experts in science that have had success on science careers and the attendance to the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting 2016 (AAAS).

The meeting was going to take place in Washington DC on February 11 to 15. On February 10th I got to the Luis Muñoz Marín airport and met with some of the other fellows. There we got to know each other better and even played a very interesting game called Dark Stories. We laughed a lot and it was a very good way to break the ice. So I got to Washington DC, boarded the metro and arrived at the hotel where the AAAS meeting would take place on the next five days. While in the meeting, I had the opportunity to attend different talks about science topics. Mostly, I attended neuroscience and science education meetings. There I had the opportunity to ask questions to the speakers and even attended an Artificial Intelligence talk by an author I have read over the years, Christoph Koch. The talk was about how new methods to implement Artificial Intelligence algorithms are helping scientists understand how consciousness works. For example, new algorithms are being developed based on how psychiatric patients respond to sophisticated psychological batteries and then these algorithms are compared with real data obtained from real psychiatric patients. The findings are surprising since with these new algorithms scientists can get new insights on how consciousness works without having to recruit real patients. The findings can even extend for the application to video games or virtual reality scenarios to create programs for

psychology and psychiatry students. Even though Artificial Intelligence is interesting enough; I also had the opportunity to attend to another talk about how mini-brains are being developed from human stem cells. Human mini-brains can be used for being more accurate at the time of prediction for the effectiveness of a drug or treatment than the actual animal models of neurological diseases used in laboratories today. All these talks were fascinating, they were very engaging and interesting.

Every day after attending to a few conferences at the AAAS meeting the YCA fellows spent time together. We had very interesting conversations and even discussed different possibilities on how we can engage with other students interested in science on science careers. On the last day of the meeting we attended a workshop for Effective Communication in Science by Luis Quevedo who is a science journalist and TV host for NTN24, a 24-hour Spanish-language news channel. During the workshop I had the opportunity to present to all the YCA fellows my project which is a website for teachers of the Department of Education of Puerto Rico. Also, I had the opportunity to simulate a television interview with Mr. Quevedo who gave me very good advice on how to give a direct, clear and concise message when communicating anything to do with science. Also, other students had the opportunity to present their investigations and practice their communication skills. Having the opportunity to attend a science meeting, getting to know other Puerto Rican scientists and having the opportunity to collaborate with other members of the science Hispanic community was a very enriching experience.

After culmination of the meeting I traveled back to Puerto Rico and started thinking about what should I do next. The YCA program has not ended up to this date and I have to continue with my thesis work and all the doctoral classes I am attending. But, this phase of the YCA has motivated me even more to achieve higher standards of academic achievement, develop better strategies for science outreach at my university and community and to continue studies in a science career. Now things look different. I am taking new perspectives on what directions should I take my career as a student, healthcare professional, scientist and entrepreneur. I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the program and hope to motivate other student colleagues to apply for future YCA programs.

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