

# Giving Voice | Imbalance

a project to raise awareness of the gender challenges in STEM environments,  
written by students, postdoctoral scholars,  
faculty, and staff at Caltech.

More information at [givingvoice.caltech.edu](http://givingvoice.caltech.edu)

The Caltech logo, featuring the word "Caltech" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font, centered within a light orange rectangular background.

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FADE IN.

Lounge and kitchen area of an academic science building Kai and Taylor drink coffee/tea, nibble muffins at a table. Alex enters.

ALEX

Great call on grabbing coffee.

KAI

Yeah--I really needed to get away from lab. It's been a long week.

ALEX

I hear ya. I'm trying to gear up for fall conferences, but somehow I got stuck with three undergrads this summer.

TAYLOR

Wow, three?!

ALEX

Yeah, I'm not sure how I'm going to manage all three, and I've got my own project to worry about--but at least it'll boost my teaching statement.

TAYLOR

At least you got positive results for your paper before they got here.

Alex pulls out his cell phone.

ALEX

Yeah that's true, and it doesn't hurt that some of them are pretty cute.

Cameron enters, stands by Alex and peers over his shoulder to see the image.

ALEX

We got one back from last summer, and she has, uhhhh...grown up.

Alex hands the phone to Cameron.

KAI

Academically, dude!

CAMERON

You've got to admit, she is pretty hot...

Cameron holds the phone up to the others. Taylor turns away towards Kai.

TAYLOR

Okay. Anyway, I've been the only woman in the lab this year...and now all our summer students are women --it's a bit weird.

CAMERON

That's because our whole division is white and male.

Kai considers this point.

KAI

Yeah, I hadn't considered that - We do need more diversity.

TAYLOR

But they better have the skills to make it here.

CAMERON

Didn't they say that about us?

TAYLOR

Look, I'm a postdoc, not a babysitter. You want to work in this lab? Great. But it's about doing your own research, not having your hand held the whole time.

KAI

They should have an idea of what they are doing by now.

CAMERON

An idea, maybe, but they're not as independent as you think.

TAYLOR

Ya they're always asking silly questions. I mean, it's fine, but the answers would be way more obvious if they would just calm down.

ALEX

And one keeps asking me every time they need to use the instrument. If I were master of the instrument schedule, I think I'd have my PhD already?

CAMERON

I know! Wait, you let them use the that one of a kind instrument. Without supervision? If they break it we are all screwed! And I'm blaming you.

Alex shakes his head. Kai changes the subject.

KAI

This is my first time with an undergrad. How closely should I be monitoring them? I don't know how much progress they're supposed to make.

CAMERON

This is my 3rd time having undergrads, and I still don't know how I'm supposed to teach them new skills, while letting them work independently, and possibly fail.

TAYLOR

You don't really want them to fail but they still need to know what research is really like.

ALEX

Ehhh, don't worry about making their lab experience perfect. Focus on making their whole summer worthwhile. Like hanging out on weekends, maybe asking one out...

KAI

Asking them out? They're like kids, man.

ALEX

So I take it you will be less than enthusiastic that I was texting my undergrad last night asking if she had a boyfriend?

KAI

Not okay man! They're lab family.

ALEX

What!?! We hang out off-campus with them. Our group goes stargazing, we have happy hour, and we've all hung out at the beach in our bathing suits!

KAI

Well I'm still trying to figure out how to set some boundaries so that they get the mentor bit without too much of the friend bit.

Kai turns to Taylor.

KAI

How do you do it?

TAYLOR

It might look like I know what I'm doing but I am actually just figuring it out as I go. You really need to make sure you distinguish yourself as above them - they can't be your friend.

ALEX

Oh come on. We drink with our advisors at socials! We're all on a first name basis. Aren't they both supervisors and friends?

TAYLOR

Whatever, it's a workplace, we need it to be professional.

CAMERON

Whatever that means.

TAYLOR

One of my students asked me what to do when someone in the lab cracked a joke that made her uncomfortable.

CAMERON

Oh you mean the one about being moody on her period.

TAYLOR

I hate dealing with this stuff! I told her to just let it go. When it comes to my undergrads I am all mentor. I don't want to hear about their personal problems.

CAMERON

Why are they even talking?

TAYLOR

Right. If you want to talk, let's talk about science. Don't complain to me about some joke or booze nights out. What happens off campus needs to stay off campus.

ALEX

Lighten up! You're making this way too complicated! These students are only in lab for a couple months. They'll learn some science. But it's the summer. We can all enjoy it.

KAI

I don't know...I worked really hard on my undergraduate research to prepare me for grad school.

ALEX

(He starts to slowly recognize something) Well, yeah, when I was an undergrad my mentor did help me out quite a bit.

CAMERON

I suppose we owe them the same.

They all seem to agree on this, sip their beverages, and look out into the window with their own thoughts.