CRA-W Grad Cohort
By Jean Paula Salac and Jieun Chon

The Computing Research Association Women (CRA-W) Grad Cohort was held in San Francisco, California, USA on April 13-14, 2018. Two participants in the event contributed the following comments about their experience.

Jean Paula Salac, Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago in CS Education, described her experience: Upon arriving at CRA-W Grad Cohort, I was stunned by the sheer number of female CS graduate students. I had been to Grace Hopper before, but given its size and audience, I barely met any other grad students there. I instantly felt less alone at the CRA-W Grad Cohort. As one of around 20 women in my PhD program, I felt very isolated. Although I had made friends in my program, there were some experiences I had that my male peers did not. I frequently found it taxing to explain these experiences in a way they would understand.

At Grad Cohort, I found a community of women who understood my experience. I didn't have to worry if others would believe me, if others would judge me negatively, or if I would get blowback. It was cathartic to talk freely and affirm each other's experiences.

It was also the first conference I've been to where attendees were given such a high level of ownership–we were truly able to make the conference our own. We were encouraged to organize events outside of the scheduled talks, enabling us to build stronger bonds with each other. We also initiated "issue-centric" gatherings to fill gaps in the official agenda, such as discussions on being a parent, or managing a chronic illness while in grad school.

Grad Cohort also presented an amazing opportunity to meet other female researchers at more advanced career stages. Not only did I

learn practical tips for success in and beyond grad school, I was also inspired by their stories. Prior to meeting them in person, I had put these women on a pedestal. Learning about their stories humanized them–it was moving to learn about the obstacles they've faced, most of which were very similar to those many of us grad students were facing. It showed us that their success is attainable and that we could be similarly successful.

I was also exposed to careers other than the well-known academia and industry paths. Prior to the conference, I only knew of one pathway scientists used to enter into public service. At Grad Cohort, I learned from more senior women about multiple paths to STEM education policy, a career path I strongly considered. I also learned to keep an open mind and to explore various career paths throughout grad school.

I left Grad Cohort feeling energized about my PhD again. The road ahead was not going to be any less challenging. However, this time I had strategies to overcome these challenges, and more importantly, a community of female CS researchers I could rely on.

Photo Courtesy of Jean Salac

Jieun Chon, Master's student at Virginia Tech, offered the following comments: I attended CRA-W and it was a wonderful opportunity

that inspired me a lot. The head of the Computer Science Department of Virginia Tech encouraged students to pursue this opportunity, and I was accepted to attend. At first, I was a little intimidated, because I had not even started on my thesis and was not sure how I would use the time meaningfully. After only a few hours of landing in San Francisco, I was relieved from the anxiety perfectly. I met a lot of inspiring people all the time during the conference, not only at the panels but also other graduate students.

Depending on our interests, we were able to attend different talks. My interest was getting a full-time position after the Master's program, and all the advice gave me a great guide for my resume and interview preparation. A few years ago, I often compared myself with other colleagues and did not have much confidence in my coding, research, and English. At the CRA-W Grad Cohort, I had advice from top schools or companies' researchers and software developers. They truly cared about me like their sister, not as a potential hire. One of the panels emphasized to me to be confident about my skill sets, language, and personality. I kept that in mind and decided to quit comparing with others. I started building up stronger career preparation with much stronger passion and confidence about myself. At this point, I have received a full-time offer from Walmart and am also still in the interview process with other major companies including Microsoft, Google, Facebook, and Bloomberg.

Also, attending CRA-W inspired me a lot for my research and extracurriculars. I was able to meet so many intelligent women who are studying in various fields in Computer Science at top universities. We all connected with each other throughout the events and afterward. I decided to continue to spread the positive energy and inspiration on campus after I came back to my school. A few months after the CRA-W event, I was selected as an October winner of the Aspire! Award at Virginia Tech,

which is for recognizing students who exemplify Student Affairs' Aspirations for Student Learning. I have no doubt that attending CRA-W helped me to grow and inspire people on my campus.

It was also a nice trip to San Francisco. After our professional sessions, we organized several groups by interests. I cannot forget the enjoyment of traveling to Chinatown and running during San Francisco's beautiful sunset with my colleagues. I would love to spread this opportunity to other women at Virginia Tech and encourage others to attend the next year. Attending CRA-W Grad Cohort was definitely a turning point of my life.

Photo Courtesy of Jieun Chon