Dr. Claire Bowen

Dr. Claire Bowen is the lead data scientist on topics involving privacy and data security at the Urban Institute, which has the goal of “advancing the well-being of people and places across the United States.” Due to having a unique perspective on data science topics because of her background in physics, Dr. Bowen gave an intriguing talk to our class on the 3rd of December about her career story up to the Urban Institute, what her role at the company entails, and useful career/life advice for people in any industry.

In terms of career advice, Dr. Bowen’s commentary on her undergraduate in physics was extremely helpful to me because I share that same undergraduate path with her, so being able to relate to her thought process and see how she used this different background to aid her in future endeavors was invaluable to me. Even for those who haven’t shared the same path in undergraduate that we have, there was still useful advice to glean from this portion of her talk. For starters, she emphasized how internships can open many doors due to the experience as well as social connections one can make during them. She also stressed that internships allow one to figure out more clearly what one would like to do, especially as a graduate student. Another useful piece of career advice from Dr. Bowen’s talk was when she went over how networking allowed her to make connections and help familiarize people with her work, which eventually enabled her to skip straight to an in-person interview for the Urban Institute, where she works now. This is a powerful anecdote to show why networking matters and certainly changed my perspective on networking. The last great piece of career advice that was given in this section was that one should be willing to learn and that “it’s okay to not know” when it comes to certain topics.

In terms of an aspect of her technical work and its potential implications, Dr. Bowen showed off the Spatial Equity Data Tool, which lets one upload national-level, state-level, county-level, or city-level data to see if there are any disparities in that area. In the example, she showed how the tool was used by somebody on Twitter to highlight that McDonald’s are overrepresented in white areas, and locations with broken ice cream machines tend to be in low-income and Black areas. While the tool was originally created to be used by cities to reveal possible biases in policy or misdistribution of resources throughout the city, this one example shows another possible use of the tool as well as highlighting one disadvantage that low-income neighborhoods face. The implication of a tool like this is that once such biases are brought to light, steps can be taken to fix or at least mitigate the damages the shown resource misallocations have caused in those areas. Another possible implication of a tool like this for the average person is that future policies can be made with these discoveries in mind, creating a more equal and fair community for us all, which allows more opportunities for all.

Overall, Dr. Bowen gave a concise yet informative presentation about data privacy while also providing invaluable career advice to any college-age person. She stressed the importance of internships both in making connections and possibly figuring out what you would like to do. Another point of career advice she gave was about utilizing one’s unique background as a strength rather than viewing it as a weakness. Dr. Bowen also gave insight into some of the work of the Urban Institute and data privacy. One aspect of the Urban Institute’s work was the Spatial Equity Data Tool which has implications for everybody affected by policy decisions. All of these things put together made for an intriguing talk with great career advice and discussion about how we can use data to better the lives of everyone.