

STEM

Tech Groups Have Long Encouraged Girls to Pursue STEM. Could the Anti-DEI Wave End That?

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo Apr 3, 2025



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Growing up in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, Anushay Anjum loved school but was especially enamored with the sciences. Biology, physics, chemistry, information technology — she enjoyed them all and had her sights set on a career in engineering.

But Anjum also felt the drag of discouragement in a society that, as she describes it, as one where the conventional wisdom deemed health care — a discipline focused on caregiving — as the only acceptable field for women within science, technology, engineering and math.

During a family wedding where she talked about her goal of becoming an engineer, one relative's response left Anjum stunned: "Oh, you have such soft, pretty hands. They're not meant for engineering."

"I remember just being so fazed by that, like, 'That's such an odd thing to say to a 15-year-old girl,'" Anjum, now 22, recalls. "I remember telling my dad that I wanted to be an engineer of some sort, and he said, 'I think you should be a doctor because that's the only thing that girls can excel at in STEM.' I don't think he meant that because he was sexist. I think he meant that because he was trying to show me an accurate representation of our society."

Anjum would brush up against a series of other roadblocks before eventually earning a spot in New York University's computer science undergraduate program. One of the things that propelled her, she says, was being accepted into the [Summer Science Program](#). Founded in 1959 in California, the initiative offers high school juniors from around the globe a chance to do college-level research in subjects, including astrophysics and biochemistry.


While the pandemic shifted the program online when Anjum participated, it was as though she had finally found her tribe.

"These were kids who were [computer] programming at a college level, and for some reason they saw themselves in me, as well," Anjum says. "They thought I was really smart and I was really cool, and all my jokes landed, even though they were all super nerdy and super geeky. Everyone liked *Star Wars*, everyone liked Minecraft. All of those things made me realize that there is a place for me, and it isn't in Pakistan."

And [the Summer Science Program] was the center of my decision to start applying abroad.”

She was part of a community that believed in her potential, no matter that Anjum felt she wasn’t what both her society and other science programs elevated as the prototypical STEM prodigy: She wasn’t a boy; she wasn’t rich; she wasn’t American.

That’s why Anjum is among those dismayed by the aggressive backlash against programs centered on diversity, equity and inclusion in the federal government, private companies and higher education.



The push to dismantle DEI initiatives have already had ripple effects among organizations aimed at supporting and increasing the number of women in STEM careers. The Washington Post [reported](#) that following the 2023 Supreme Court ruling that affirmative action in university admissions was unlawful, tech companies began to squirm amid a wave of DEI backlash among industry leaders.

Girls in Tech and Women Who Code were among the organizations that shuttered last year after funding from donors and corporate backers dried up, while others were forced to rebrand. (Women Who Code was revived in March after being [acquired](#) by Lesbians Who Tech.)

In one widely reported case, a private school in South Carolina was forced to [cancel](#) its Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day after the Army Corps of Engineers and other federal offices backed out of the event.

What does the upheaval mean for programs that promote girls’ participation in STEM? Some experts say the fear of anti-DEI backlash among philanthropies and corporate sponsors could, and in some cases already is, leading some funders to distance themselves from those initiatives.

Shifting Landscape

The White House's campaign against diversity initiatives has led to what Erika Dadsetan, executive director of consulting firm VISIONS, Inc., calls a mix of concern and commitment. Her firm advises companies, schools and other organizations on cultivating inclusivity in the workplace.

Trump has personally called on not just government agencies but corporate America to roll back their DEI programs, and [many are falling in line](#). Brands like Major League Baseball, Pepsi and Google have removed mentions of diversity from their websites or eliminated diversity goals in hiring. Costco stands out as a major company that's defying the order.

Anxiety about complying with Trump's directives is reaching programs for girls in STEM, some of which are feeling pressure to soften language or reframe their mission of advancing gender equity in tech.



Some donors are hesitating to publicly support initiatives centered on girls or communities of color in STEM out of concern for political pushback or legal entanglements.

— Erika Dadsetan

“We are absolutely seeing a chilling effect, especially for smaller nonprofits and newer funders,” Dadsetan tells EdSurge. “Some donors are hesitating to publicly support initiatives centered on girls or communities of color in STEM out of concern for political pushback or legal entanglements.”

The opposite is also true, she adds, with some funders viewing challenges to diversity policies as a test of their integrity and a reason to double down on their

nonprofit support.

“The organizations that will emerge stronger are the ones staying grounded in their mission and honest about the inequities they aim to address,” Dadsetan says.

Based in the Texas Hill Country tech hub of Austin, Girlstart offers a slew of STEM programs for girls in two dozen school districts. Executive Director Shane Woods says that while the nonprofit hasn’t felt the pinch of donors closing their wallets, its partners serving populations in the Trump administration’s crosshairs — such as the LGBTQ+ community and people without legal status in the U.S. — are feeling the effects.

“I will say one of the silver linings of this very turbulent and unwavering onslaught of executive orders is we now have people raising their hand and saying, ‘How can we support the youth?’” Woods says. “‘This is some money because we believe in this. You’re doing the work.’”

Like Dadsetan, Woods and other nonprofit leaders are prepared to artfully reframe their organizations’ activities enough to escape potential political attacks, without giving up their core missions.

To illustrate her point, Woods offers the example of University of Texas at Austin’s annual Girls Day, which invites thousands of girls to the campus to learn about STEM careers. It could have run afoul of the state’s ban on DEI programs in higher education, but it carried on as a recruitment initiative.

“That is the kind of word play everyone is having to navigate in order to still be able to do the work that we all do,” Woods says. “Of course, you want to still have women going to UT. What does it look like to do that in a way that doesn’t highlight diversity, equity and inclusion out loud but we know that it’s making sure that girls know they are welcomed?”

From a pragmatic view, Woods says girls are simply needed in STEM. As populations boom in cities like Dallas, the state with a hardline stance against DEI will still need engineers who can build out the infrastructure to support more people. Funders contacting Woods to support Girlstart are doing so with an eye to the future, thinking about how to grow and retain a STEM workforce in the state.

“We will show girls what it means to be flexible,” Woods says. “We will show girls what it means to mindfully resist when we know what the best is and can be. Girlstart doesn't have to change her mission because we will always be able to say we want more women in these places. We want more people going into engineering so they can solve the world's problems using their intelligence.”

The Future Beckons

Anjum, whose STEM achievements took her from Pakistan to NYU, recalls a conversation she had over coffee with a sophomore who wanted to talk about Anjum's summer interning at Microsoft.

The woman made a passing comment about the struggles of Asian dating culture, and Anjum pressed her to continue. The woman explained that when she told her boyfriend about being selected for a tech internship, he retorted that she'd only gotten the position because of her gender.



We're talking about a significant loss of opportunities that directly impact children's development and future potential.

— Shane Woods

“The fact that someone who is that close to her is saying something like that was

very jarring to me because the men I surround myself with aren't like that,” Anjum recalls. “It put me back into that wedding when I was 15, and someone said that my hands were too womanly and too soft to be an engineer's hands. I think that the big issue is that even now in 2025, even with years of quote-unquote DEI initiatives within our workplace, it's not been enough because there's still a kid at NYU who has it in himself to tell his girlfriend when she gets an internship, that she wasn't worth it. That she only got it because of the gender she was assigned at birth.”

Trump has **framed** diversity, equity and inclusion policies as discriminatory against white men, a group that makes up over 80 percent of tech executives. The FCC is making an example out of Disney with threats to **revoke ABC's broadcasting license** over DEI goals in the parent company's hiring practices, with the commission chair calling the diversity policy “race- and gender-based discrimination.”

Statistics show that years of corporate efforts to close the gender gap have **hardly moved the needle** for women in STEM jobs. Research finds that girls absorb messages about being unqualified for science and math classes at a young age, and **building their confidence** is just as important as the coursework to keep them in STEM.

Woods says that loss of funding for girls in STEM programs would cut girls off from learning and mentorships opportunities in the short term, and it would exacerbate the tech gender gap in the long run.

“When we discuss the potential loss of funding for 'girls in STEM' programs, we're not just talking about a reduction in activities,” Woods says. “We're talking about a significant loss of opportunities that directly impact children's development and future potential.”

In Dadsetan's view, the tech industry — including the artificial intelligence field — is going to see worse products if girls lose the existing pipelines into science

coursework and careers.



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— Sonia Kekeh

“A lack of diversity doesn’t just mean missed opportunity. It means flawed design, biased algorithms and data that reinforces harm,” Dadsetan says. “Big data is only as ethical as the people who design it. Without a diverse range of lived experiences at the table, we risk building tools that perpetuate injustice on a global scale.”

For 19-year-old Sonia Kekeh, an aerospace engineering student at MIT, her dream of working in the sciences never wavered. Her parents, who are from Togo in West Africa, emphasized that education would be her path to upward mobility.

When she saw the 2017 film *Hidden Figures*, which profiled the Black women mathematicians who were crucial to NASA winning the 1960s Space Race, it cemented Kekeh’s decision to go into aerospace studies, eventually settling on space policy and law.

It would also foreshadow Kekeh’s passion for representation in STEM. She estimates that in her class of MIT students slated to graduate in 2027, four out of 54 students are Black women.

“One thing that’s important is for women in STEM to see themselves reaching their goals,” Kekeh says. “Even now I have people reaching out to me [on social media] saying, ‘I’m in seventh grade, MIT is my dream school. How did you get in?’”

What has helped Kekeh succeed, she says, is a support system that includes both her

family and her academic community. Among her mentors at MIT is one of the foremost experts on aerospace, sustainability and equity. Like Anjum, Kekeh communed with other science-minded young people and mentors as part of the Summer Science Program.

It's perhaps because of her strong community that Kekeh says there's still a need for programs that cultivate girls' interest in STEM, particularly because they foster a sense of belonging and help girls understand all their career choices.

"It's just really important not to close the door behind you, and just to provide that mentorship, have those conversations with younger girls about what it's like to be in STEM," Kekeh says, "and to build them up and make sure they know the doors are open. It's their choice, it's not the world's choice about if they can go into STEM."

Anjum is frustrated by the implication inherent in current anti-DEI efforts that diversifying science and technology means lowering standards.

While it's an ongoing struggle in STEM fields, she alludes to the need for a change in mentality that starts when students are young.

"If any fathers or mothers read [this], I think they should understand that if they think there is a difference between a daughter and a son, they should re-evaluate that," Anjum says. "The women in my life are so kind and such powerhouses in their careers. It saddens me to hear their stories because regardless of where they come from, there is sexism there, regardless of who they are and how privileged they were. I think we are too far in the future for that to be a shared lived reality for every woman that you meet, period."

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