



## Member Spotlight: How a Viral Op-Ed Ignited John Skrentny's Public Engagement

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In January, John Skrentny worked with SSN to place an [op-ed about STEM education](#), based on his [recent book](#), in the *Los Angeles Times*. The piece, titled "Why pushing STEM majors is turning out to be a terrible investment," garnered more than 70,000 views within a week of publication and was one of the top-read articles on the *Los Angeles Times* website. As a result of the publication, Skrentny received interview requests from various media outlets, was contacted by fellow researchers and STEM workers to discuss his findings, and engaged in multiple new policy opportunities with others working in this space. Skrentny has now published a second op-ed, this time at [Newsweek](#), on retaining women in STEM fields. Skrentny co-authored the piece with Andrea Mohamed, co-founder of [QuantumBloom](#), which helps employers retain early-career women in STEM, whom he met due to his *Los Angeles Times* piece.

"Partnering with John was a terrific experience," said Andrea. "With his scholarly insights and our practical experience at QuantumBloom, we articulated a compelling case for why and how industry leaders must take action to retain and advance women in the semiconductor workforce. Our collaboration shows how academia and industry can join forces to drive change, shape policies, and hopefully, transform workplace cultures in tech."

SSN spoke with Skrentny to learn more about the many ways his op-ed helped fuel his public engagement and where he hopes this momentum will take him. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

### Q&A with John Skrentny

#### **What inspired you to write this op-ed for the LA Times and what has the response been like?**

When I write op-eds, I like to think I'm a scholar doing a service. There are so many debates that generate more heat than light. As a scholar, my job is to look at all the data and information. I try to be as unbiased as possible and shine some light and tell people what's going on. So this op-ed is a heavily researched summary of my book but with a strong point of view. And the point is not super nuanced, it's really straightforward in that STEM employers treat STEM workers badly. There's a lot of detail on that, but the simple takeaway is that

companies should be treating employees better if they value them at all. This is the space where they can make an impact.

After the piece was published, I had people coming out of the woodwork, especially STEM workers, saying this take resonated strongly with them. As a sociologist, that was very heartening. I didn't really do interviews for this book, so to have all these people saying you completely nailed it was great.

**You've also been in touch with some advocates for STEM workers. How did your op-ed play a role in that connection?**

The worker advocates seemingly came out of the blue, but they told me they've been reading the op-ed and sending it around. These are very busy people, and having this easy-to-read argument derived from the whole book was helpful for them.

We had a couple of Zoom meetings as they prepare to discuss the issues with members of Congress and the Department of Commerce. In our conversations, I'm basically going into more depth from the op-ed and trying to extrapolate to the current policy situation. I had to learn more about this CHIPS and Science Act, where the government is providing billions of dollars to semiconductor corporations that years ago sent all these jobs overseas. The federal government is now giving the corporations a ton of money to lure them back, so there is leverage to make them behave well, and that's what the advocates are really seizing on. The government is signing agreements with the corporations about how well they're going to treat workers as part of the package of getting all this money.

I also recommended that they speak with Jake Rosenfeld who I know through SSN, probably from the national convening in Chicago years ago. I talked to him about his recent book back when I was researching mine, and SSN was the link. I had no connection with him otherwise. But because I knew he was in SSN, I knew he'd be willing to talk to worker advocates.

**The message of your LA Times op-ed seemed to be a call for laborers to wake up. But the mechanisms of accountability that you're describing are all on the employer side. Do you have thoughts about the labor side?**

Yeah, that's a great question. I received emails and LinkedIn messages from people who felt exploited and upset. One person even asked me how they could organize and stop this "PIP culture." PIP means "performance improvement plan." It's often a sign you are about to be fired.

Another message was from a PhD in life sciences who had bounced around different post-docs and went into the industry without success. They were looking for help, but I'm not that guy. But messages like these did highlight for me the labor side of this issue, and how they're not well organized. For example, workers are hired with the understanding they'll work 40 hours a week but end up working 70 without additional

compensation. That's a total scandal.

Promotion ladders are another issue. Many places only offer advancement into management, which doesn't work for those who want to continue in science or engineering. The op-ed response dramatized these issues for me, and you're absolutely right—there's a huge labor side to this.

**You've co-authored a new op-ed published in Newsweek on the CHIPS Act with Andrea Mohamed, co-founder of [Quantum Bloom](#). How did that come about?**

Andrea also seemingly came out of the blue and said she had read the book, but she had first heard about me through the op-ed on LinkedIn. We did a Zoom meeting, and I just saw the synergy right there. While talking to her, the idea for the op-ed came to mind. She wants to help companies do better with retaining women and moving them to leadership positions in STEM, but she needs companies to understand that they have an important role to play. It's not all about the so-called STEM education pipeline not providing enough women STEM grads.

It just so happens that I had just written a book that says companies have an important role to play, so that fit perfectly with her organization's message. I sent her 20 copies and she's sending them to business leaders.

The CHIPS and Science Act is about creating jobs but also about competing with China. This is a national security moment that actually fits with my first two books, which argued that worries about national security mitigate or mute partisan differences because we have a common adversary or competitor. It's a great opportunity to boost women's employment in STEM, where they are severely underrepresented.

We'll see what happens after this. I can imagine working with her more on this kind of stuff. She's amazingly well-connected and fearless in a way I could never be. One thing I want to emphasize to other scholars is that if you can make these contacts, you learn a lot.

There are other benefits. I'm way out here in this beautiful southwest corner of the country, so I find it challenging to attend east coast meetings where networking is easier. Traveling to these meetings takes an entire day, sometimes leaving me exhausted and requiring an overnight stay. This makes it harder for me to engage regularly and build connections with federal policymakers. Writing op-eds, especially with well-connected people like Andrea, helps me connect with change makers in these circles, which can expand beyond my more local efforts in San Diego or Sacramento. I now see this as a potential model of doing good with my scholarly work.

**What are your goals with all of this public engagement work?**

If you really want to change things, you don't care if you're the one who first pushed the idea, you just want people to start talking about it. Ideally, people start talking more and more about employers having responsibilities to treat their workers better, and we get some policy change.

I'm excited about this new op-ed because it's more specific and focused on the CHIPS and Science Act, which means it could be a part of more concrete change. Playing even a small role in the government making employers more responsible with taxpayer dollars would be an awesome outcome.

## **JOHN D. SKRENTNY**

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Skrentny's research focuses on work, education, and policy. Overarching themes in Skrentny's writings include how higher education and employment can be better organized and regulated to provide equal opportunities for students and workers and help them to achieve their own and society's goals. Skrentny is a former leader of the SSN San Diego Chapter, and a former director of the Yankelovich Center for Social Science Research. Skrentny has served in an advisory capacity with several organizations in Southern California, mostly focused on inclusiveness and economic development