

A legacy of educational privilege

By Diane Rowland

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Mentorship can help spread educational privilege more equitably. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/insta_photos.

I am part of an educational legacy of privilege. I am proud to say that I am the middle part (the peanut butter so to speak) of a generational Ph.D. “sandwich.” With my daughter entering her Ph.D. program last year, I will be part of a three-generational education legacy—my father, me, and now my daughter will each have earned a Ph.D. in the same department and from the same institution. As you can imagine, I love to tell the story although my daughter is rather embarrassed at times, and there is an element of “oh mom!” when I start to recount the amazing odds of this occurrence (a reaction I’m sure this article will elicit from her upon reading it). I mean what are the chances of having this kind of Ph.D. lineage?

But lately as I’ve recounted to my daughter the essential assistance that my dad gave me during my graduate program, including editing my entire dissertation with red ink—again, not fully appreciated by me at the time. We represent a legacy of educational privilege tied very closely to, and made possible, because of mentorship. I see it now when I try to answer my daughter’s questions about topics ranging from best tips for reading the literature, meeting her adviser’s expectations, and what a first committee meeting is like. I took those supports I received from my dad for granted when I asked those same questions of him—all the way through my career. I only regret now as I’ve started on my next career path as dean of a college, that he passed away last year and I can’t ask those questions anymore.

Equitably Spreading Educational Privilege through Mentorship

A legacy of educational privilege is something higher education needs to grapple with when it comes to discussions about inclusion, diversity, equity, and access—especially related to educational access. But I think my experience has shown me that we all can make a tremendous impact on spreading that privilege more equitably through our mentorship efforts at every stage of our careers. I realized this most clearly when I spoke to a student only a couple of weeks ago. She hadn't realized that it was possible to go to graduate school being partially supported by a stipend and having tuition covered. It was really magical seeing the expression on her face as she realized that a whole new level of possibilities for a career in agricultural science had just opened up to her. Seeing her expression just confirmed to me again about the importance of sharing our educational privilege through mentorship.

It's those small details and pieces of information that we as researchers and academics take for granted: the "insider's view" of being an effective TA, giving a good talk, navigating a huge scientific meeting, networking, and exploring different career options. If you are a first-generation college or grad school student, or do not have close ties yet to a community of scientists or academicians, you may struggle or ultimately never have access to that information—possibly impacting your career trajectory. This situation is at the core of systemic issues of equity and inclusion, but something we don't frequently consider.

I'm excited to see more emphasis on the value of mentorship and actual training for effective mentoring. The Societies have done an excellent job of carrying out this mission through the Golden Opportunity Scholars program, early career programs, and the Women in Science Committee. I've also been part of a new program at the University of Florida called "Women Lead," aimed at mentoring women graduate

students and postdoctoral associates. The program utilizes a “pod” concept. These pods are community structures of varying size and scope—smaller pods to allow for those somewhat confidential questions, and broader, larger pods composed of members with similar career goals.

I hope we all can somehow support these programs with some of our time and effort. But remember, there are opportunities all around us, every day, to help pass on that legacy of educational privilege.

Editor’s note: This article is part of a series written by members of the Women in Science Committee, for all Society members. For more information, visit

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