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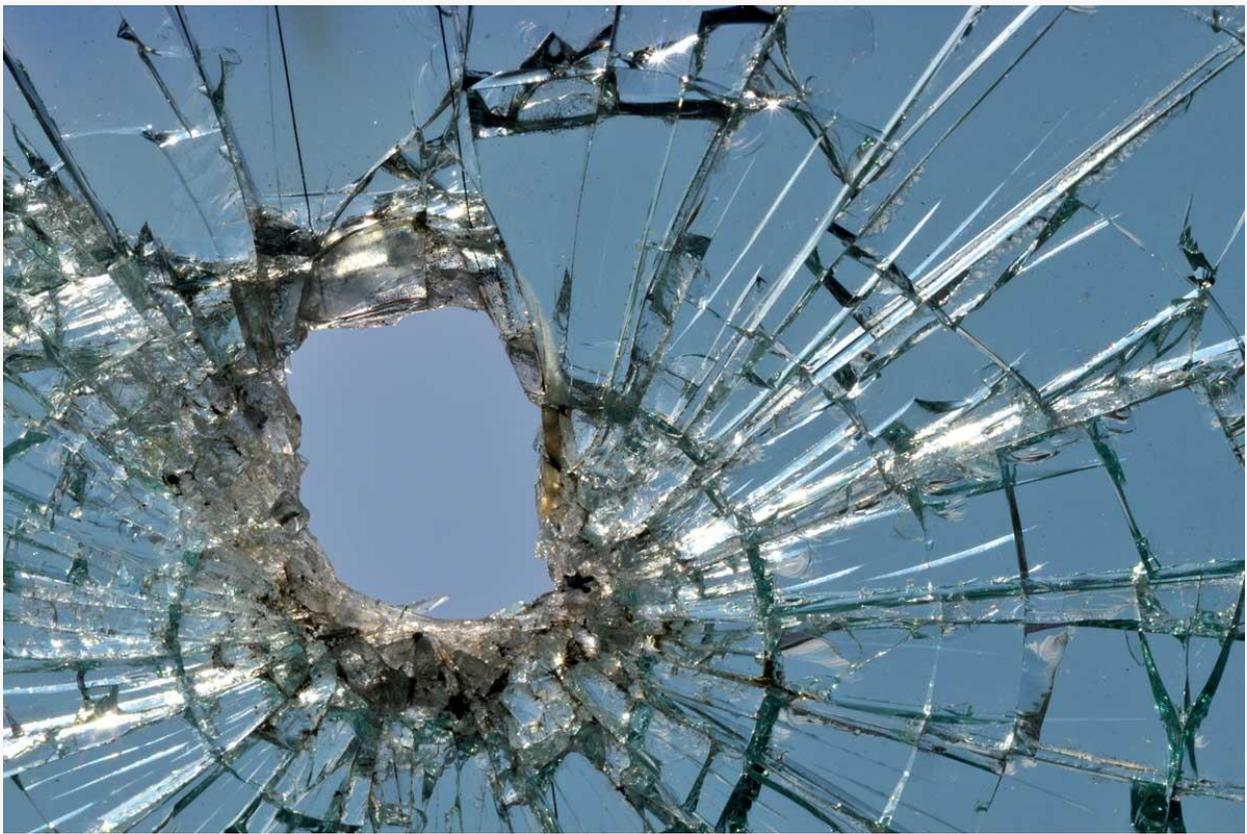


Shattered Glass Ceilings that Pave the Way to Inspiration

By Seetha Raghavan
UCF Forum columnist

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Academic institutions need to come to the realization that to grow and retain a diverse student population, there is a need to demonstrate commitment to representation.



This year has started with glass ceilings shattered in the highest offices of the country. You cannot hide the powerful feeling that rises from the pit of your stomach and overtakes your entire being as you watch historic “firsts” unfold if you are underrepresented in some way — a woman, person of color, LGBTQ or even a scientist in leadership trying to communicate outside your realm.

Every one of us faces such distinct challenges that none of the umbrella categorizations such as diversity, equity and inclusion quite does justice to our individual experiences. But that feeling of hope and retribution, when a breakthrough is made, is common to us all simply because representation matters and it paves the way to inspiration.

The struggle is real.

My own experience being a woman in STEM has not been without struggles of underestimation amidst triumphs that clearly dismantled them. It ranged from being called a liability by my design team in school, being doubted for my ability to handle large equipment at work, or being questioned on the first day of class if I were really qualified to teach it. The recourse was to perform beyond the norm, to aim for perfection at everything put before me so that any stereotypical doubts were so clearly and often shamefully dismissed.

Misogynism runs deep and sometimes resides hidden in the most trusted and respected, until it reveals itself to the disappointment of those on the receiving end.

To continuously work harder to shock and awe can be exhausting, and although I have learned to manage this better, there is not that one day when it all ends. Misogynism runs deep and sometimes resides hidden in the most trusted and respected, until it reveals itself to the disappointment of those on the receiving end.

What can we do to change the narrative?

“I just want to say that I’ve never had a woman professor in any of my engineering classes so far, you’re the first and I just want to say that I...I just realized how much this means to me.” It was the first day of my online senior level class of more than 200 students and she was a voice at the other end, one of the few women in the class, who needed to share this overwhelming feeling, the same one that came through me as I beamed, “I’m so glad,” then trailed with a lump in my throat, “We really need to do better.”

Why was it this way? What can I do in my position to make it better? Because it was very much my responsibility to do something to change the narrative from what I experienced as a student myself. As an engineer and systematic problem solver, I told myself we need to innovate the process.

Scholarship and fellowship opportunities have made a difference through the years. But recently, some of the most amazing and successful models are emerging through organizations, formed by vibrant people in the aerospace industry with a purpose and a cause, who recognize that the biggest antidote to lack of diversity is to lead by example.

They have taken the lead through innovative offers of “internship plus mentorship” experiences in companies that are making history in space exploration and aeronautics. Beyond the summer internship, the promise is a support system of mentorship that lasts well beyond the internship and a cohort of colleagues much like themselves to uplift

them along their path. The guidance of a role-model mentor is key to the success of each of these fellows and the outcomes speak to the success.

[Brooke Owens Fellows](#), or “Brookies” as they are known, are a testament to this exuberant success of women in space, and [Matthew Isakowitz](#) fellows have similarly made their mark in historic space achievements. The newly introduced [Patti Grace Smith Fellowship](#) and [Zed Factor fellowships](#) that offer opportunities to underrepresented students are set to do the same.

The vast numbers of growing applicants to these now highly competitive opportunities clearly show us that the lack of underrepresented students in STEM was never the issue, rather that well-developed opportunities that stress the importance of representation is the key to bringing these students to the foreground.

Academic institutions should come to the realization that to grow and retain a diverse student population, there is a need to demonstrate commitment to representation from the start and ensure the support continues beyond their doors. This can start with ensuring a diverse faculty, continue with invited speakers or role models who inspire, and extend this beyond students’ time here through a network of alumni mentors who guide and uplift them along their path to success. Partnerships with industry and professional organizations can support this endeavor.

To make any of this a reality, what we need are champions. And yes, these are the “superheroes” who are not just us, they are also “not us.”

How can you have an immense understanding of the significance of representation, to be a champion of the underrepresented when you are not one and never had to face the struggle? But that is exactly what is needed and what has made the difference that culminated in the shattered ceilings in full view, giving many among us the powerful feeling of “we can, too” as this year begins.

We need superheroes across the echelons who recognize that representation matters. We need them to ride the momentum of change and act now.

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