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## **Diversity in the UTMB Pipeline**

We get mixed messages from the research community all the time, those of us in the educational outreach business. On one hand, everyone agrees that not enough girls and minorities are “in the pipeline” pursuing careers in the sciences and engineering, yet when asked to host high school or undergraduate students in their labs, the refrain we often hear is that these kids are “high maintenance”. They have no experience, little formal training in science, and they’re just, well, immature. Yes, and so was I at 17; I just needed someone to show me the way, to assure me that I could succeed in this demanding field. I did find such mentors, so now I try to do the same for the next generation, with the support of both UTMB and a major medical research foundation.

So it was that last winter I received a delightful e-mail forwarded by a mentor from one of our high school students. Most of them come to us from within Texas, but this young lady had traveled all the way from the East Coast to be part of our program. Unknown to me until the end of last summer’s program, she had been an immigrant to the United States some years earlier. Alone in the world and speaking no English, she and her mother had come here from Central America with just the clothes on their backs. All these years, she related to me through tears of gratitude, her mother had worked two jobs to provide for her all those things needed to get a first-rate public education in the U.S.A. In her e-mailed note, our student talked of a trip she had just taken to visit a prestigious eastern university, with an eye toward possibly attending there. Upon returning home, waiting for her in the mail was a notification of early acceptance to Prestigious University. In the forwarded e-mail, she thanked her mentor, who, as it turns out, had written a strong letter of recommendation for her, based on her time in the lab at

UTMB. She also said that UTMB's program had been for her "...a life-changing experience."

Thankfully, there are each year enough lab heads spread across the UTMB community who care about whether the next generation of physicians, scientists, and allied health professionals mirrors in its diversity that of our society in general, that we are able to find lab homes for all of our kids. It is likely not possible to measure the importance of mentoring kids such as this young lady in additional papers published or grants received, I wonder if there might not be another way to gauge the value in having done so. The data tell us clearly that once a young person breaks the cycle and becomes the first in a family to attend college, the likelihood that his or her offspring will also be college-educated increases dramatically. Perhaps our student won't win the Nobel Prize, but who knows, maybe her daughter (or granddaughter) will!