

David A. Watson, Ph.D. current associate vice chancellor for research for UT System, program manager for the National Space Biomedical Research Institute and adjunct professor at UTMB in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, submitted this essay for the "Common Threads: How UTMB's support of diversity enhances the workplace" essay contest held in conjunction with UTMB's celebration of diversity July 11-15, 2005. Although Dr. Watson didn't have the winning essay, the thoughts are inspirational and worth sharing.



Common Threads

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, 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, though, 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!

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Alumni Receptions at a City Near You

UTMB has launched a new initiative to bring together former, current and future alumni, faculty, students, post docs and friends of UTMB at selected national meetings across the country. The next alumni outreach is planned for Washington, D.C. during the Society for Neuroscience meeting in November 2005. If you live in the D.C. area, please make sure we have current contact information so we may invite you to the activities. The next outreach after that will be in April 2006 in San Francisco, during the Experimental Biology meeting. Also, let us know of meetings that you attend that you think would be good venues to engage UTMB alumni and others.