

The duty to mentor, be visible and represent

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'Each one teach one' is an African-American proverb, birthed out of slavery, suggesting it is one's duty to pass knowledge onward to those who are not as privileged. I was one of the first generation in my family to aspire to four-year college degrees. With no previous exposure to what a career as a scientist entailed, it was a mentor/mentee relationship that ignited my lifelong passion for scientific discovery. As I trek through my scientific career, making novel discoveries, climbing what seems to be a never-ending ladder, I am reminded of my other duties... to mentor... to be visible... to represent.

I became a scientist when I was 16 years old and finishing 10th grade at the quaintly rural Hillsborough, North Carolina, public high school. At that point, I naively did not realize that for each fact in my biology textbook, there were scientists who had discovered it. If I were to have a summer job, my parents demanded that it have an educational slant. So I secured a summer internship with American Chemical Society's Project SEED program, which allowed high school students to spend summers conducting research at local university laboratories.

I arrived at Kenan Laboratories at the University of North Carolina as the newest and youngest member of one of the leading organic chemistry synthesis laboratories in the world. I left that summer with knowledge of how to design and execute experiments, present data and read literature. But it was my pairing with



PhD candidate Albert Russell that was most catalytic.

Al was a Black man. At such an impressionable age, seeing, through him, that becoming a scientist was an attainable goal was what stood out to me the most. This left me with an understanding of the necessity of visible representation in underserved communities, and the realization that one's approach to mentorship is equally as important as (or arguably more important than) their approach to scientific

discovery. Al planted a seed that summer by taking time away from his experiments to mentor me. Now it is my purpose to resow those seeds in the youth who are the future of science.

Since that summer, 'each one teach one' has become my mentoring philosophy. I make it my duty to particularly mentor people of diverse underrepresented backgrounds, to support inclusive environments and to volunteer for programs that bring STEM awareness to young curious minds. For example, I have mentored students in the National Institutes of Health HiStep 2.0 program, because I understand how important early exploration is. I believe that the earlier a student can prove to themselves that they are capable of rigorous scientific thinking, the more likely they are to fall in love with science. Not only does mentoring students of this caliber afford me an opportunity to train a burgeoning scientist who can explore science as a career option, but it also provides our laboratory with a diverse perspective that all of us can benefit from. □

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