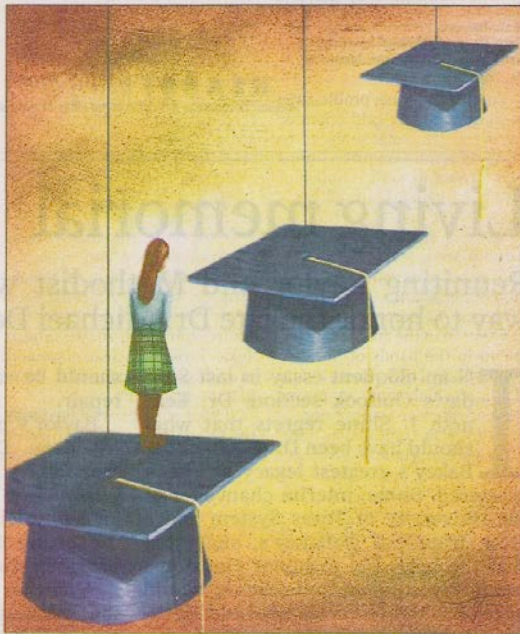


SHOW THE WAY



JON KRAUSE

Nurture Texas' new crop of citizen-scholars

■ Mentoring those of upwardly mobile backgrounds makes all the difference

By RUBY MORÚA OLMANSON

I AM a first-generation college student who attended the University of Houston. Thinking that I could handle anything that came my way, I jumped into 16 hours of course work my first semester. After all, I reasoned, I was already a seasoned student and language broker; I had translated for my parents and the Latino community from an early age, worked since age 12 and excelled in school from kindergarten through high school.

But I soon learned that undergraduate work was completely different and I began to sink into painful states of despair: classes were large; readings indecipherable; my academic analysis and writing never good enough.

I'm the 10th and youngest child of parents from northern Mexico who made Houston their home. My mother cared for my every need, all the while managing a rental property, selling Avon and manning a booth at the *barrio pulga* (flea market). My father worked 90-hour weeks in the oppressive Houston heat and humidity, unloading 100-pound sacks of dry goods from freight train box cars and containers on cargo ships.

My parents valued education. They worked tirelessly so that I wouldn't have to — so that one day I would have the tools to think and write, making a living in a more comfort-

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SCHOLARS: Once outsider, now mentor

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able environment. They gave me the gift of being bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural. Their work ethic — love for learning and grace under fire — remains with me in everything that I've undertaken.

Despite all this, as a student I still felt lost — that I was an outsider in a community of scholars. I graduated with a bachelor's degree, but only after struggling to figure out my place among so many others who seemed to be privy to the unspoken rules of the Academy long before stepping foot onto campus.

In my five years at UH I simply went through the motions, avoiding contact with advisers or professors who (inadvertently) would make me feel like a failure for not performing as well as my more successful peers.

Not surprisingly, upon graduation I ran away from all that academe embodied, hoping to escape my feelings of inadequacy — never believing that graduate school would be a path for someone like me.

Yet, after eight years of observing my partner pursue his dreams in three different graduate programs, I found my way to graduate school. I've plodded through this endeavor with his help as well as that of other mentors who never stopped believing in me, always offering unconditional and

unwavering support.

My experience as a student, combined with recognition of the enormous role mentors played in my life, led me to break my silence and feelings of embarrassment. In fact, I felt guided to become a mentor for others.

As director of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Pre-Graduate School Internship, I am now committed to improving how

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The University of Texas at Austin mentors students.

The IE Pre-Graduate School Internship, which is part of UT's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, affords undergraduates a unique mentoring experience, attracting a large number of underrepresented minority and first-generation

college students; it encourages them not only to explore graduate study but to own their education, using it to make a difference in their communities.

IE enables students to become "citizen-scholars." By providing a safe space for academic and personal exploration, the internship is an opportunity for undergraduates to fully engage in the world of research, academic writing and networking with the guidance of mentors who listen to and understand them so that they can discover their own passions and strengths, embarking on a journey that makes most sense to them.

As a successful Chicana graduate student, I know first-hand that mentoring is an essential tool in improving and diversifying higher education. Whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, getting in is hard enough; but, without the help of mentors and a trusting environment, the road to graduation can be difficult if not impossible.

I urge students as well as recent college graduates to participate in university mentorship programs. I'm proud to help administer the IE Internship at UT, a distinctive mentoring program offering students a way to continue their journey of intellectual entrepreneurship in a safe space and among others who have been there.