

# THE PHD PROJECT: CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE

Role Models and Influencers for  
Students of All Backgrounds

By  
**BERNARD J. MILANO**



I've seen my presence making a difference already in ways that I didn't imagine.

Watching the TV news with her Caucasian dorm mates, the African-American undergraduate cringed with embarrassment every time a handcuffed Black man in police custody was shown.

"It feels like the criminal represents all of us," she would later remark.

She contrasted that feeling with the day she found an African-American woman standing in front of her management class—her first professor of color.

"This feels different," she told the teacher. "I hope you don't mind if I say I am proud of you even if you don't represent all of us, because in a way you do."

"I think that I will try and do something better with my life like you did."

The PhD Project was founded in 1994 with the goal of creating thousands more scenarios like the experience described above. Since then, it has more than quadrupled the number of African-American, Hispanic American and Native American business school professors.

An immediately obvious way these nearly 1,400 minority professors make an impact is just by being who they are. As minorities, they are role models to countless students of color. They are also changing the attitudes of majority students, who may never have had a teacher of color at any level and are unprepared for the diverse work world they will soon enter.

"Professors are role models," says one of the 1,400, Dr. Oscar Holmes IV of the Rutgers School of Business. "While people can inspire others no matter their identities, it is important and special for people to be inspired by someone who shares their important identities... There is no way to quantify the value this creates for the professor and the student."

Many minority students enter college with no role models in their family or community with an academic or professional background. Something changes in them when they see a person of color who is a business professor.



You really made me think not only about the class stuff, but about why we think the way we do about people without really knowing them.

Dr. Lisa Ordóñez, vice dean and management professor at the University of Arizona, is one of many PhD Project professors who has heard a minority student say, "You're the first professor of color I've ever had."

Dr. Ordóñez has never forgotten the young woman who told her after a class, "I want to do what you're doing, because if you can do it—I can do it."

Students without professional role models "don't have someone telling them what is the next step in life—how to apply to colleges," adds Dr. Ordóñez, who had no such role models as the daughter of two migrant workers who did not finish high school.

PhD Project Professor Dr. Carliss Miller of Sam Houston State University tells how students at the 50 percent minority school "look at me in amazement" on the first day of class. Even in her first year as a professor, she recalls, "I've seen my presence making a difference already in ways that I didn't imagine."

But, she notes, "It is eye-opening to see my influence is not just on students who look like me, but all students."

Like many PhD Project professors, Dr. Miller has influenced the attitudes of Caucasian students. The change begins when they see a professor of color in their class, perhaps for the first time, and it grows when they learn of her impressive prior career as a brand manager for Procter & Gamble.

White students who grew up not seeing minorities as professionals or academics will be unprepared for jobs in corporate America, where working in diverse teams to serve diverse customers is the norm. The presence of PhD Project professors is preparing them.

In an end-of-semester email to a female African-American professor, a white student, so admittedly prejudiced that he had considered dropping the class upon discovering her race and gender, wrote, "You really made me think not only about the class stuff, but about why we think the way we do about people without really knowing them."

This student appeared to need further work to shed his biases, but he told this professor her class was the best he had ever taken "and I wish all my teachers were like you."

It was perhaps a small step, but larger ones, and many of them, are occurring on college campuses across the country as the alumni of The PhD Project make their presence felt. 📍

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# MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL WHO'S *NOT* THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?

By  
ANGÉLICA S. GUTIÉRREZ, PH.D.

“No one gets to the  
**corner office**  
by sitting on the side,  
not at the table,  
and no one gets the  
**promotion**  
if they don't think they  
deserve their success,  
or they don't even  
understand their own success.”

— SHERYL SANDBERG, COO FACEBOOK

**W**hat Sandberg was describing was the impostor syndrome. Experienced by such high profile and diverse individuals as long-time television host Oprah Winfrey, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Oscar-winning actress Jodie Foster, and Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, the impostor syndrome is the feeling of inadequacy that high-achieving individuals experience despite evidence to the contrary. High-achieving individuals feel that they are frauds and attribute achievements to luck instead of intelligence or personal merit. People who experience impostor feelings believe others overestimate their ability and fear that their inadequacies eventually will be revealed.

I remember experiencing impostor feelings as a Ph.D. student, and even now as a professor; the fear that others will eventually discover that I somehow do not belong in this career often surface. It is one of those fears that permeate but nobody ever talks about. We may talk about different fears as academics and they may range in intensity from seemingly minor—i.e., having technical difficulties during a conference presentation, to seemingly catastrophic—i.e., getting denied tenure. But the one fear that we don't talk about is the fear that sooner or later others will discover that we are not cut out for the positions we hold. The voice inside my head is usually the loudest right before I start teaching or delivering a conference presentation.



The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams don't scare you, they aren't big enough.

The voice may say things like:

"Uh, oh. The audience is going to find out that you are not really equipped to conduct research and you have no clue what you're talking about."

"That '40 World's Best Business Professors Under 40' award, you got it because of luck!"

"You landed the tenure-track position because they needed a Latina and you fit the profile."

The impostor syndrome lingers like the guest who has overstayed a welcome, except that impostorism has no job or home to go to and decides to stick around for as long as possible. I finally decided to embrace this visitor, and named it "Chicle." Chicle is the Spanish word for "gum." Just like gum on your shoe, impostorism can stick around and become exceedingly difficult to get rid of. I just ended my fifth year as a tenure-track professor and Chicle is here with me. It used to be the most debilitating visitor on earth. For the first couple of years as a professor, Chicle had the power to send my heart racing 100 mph and break me into a sweat every time I would step foot at the front of the classroom.

Anecdotes abound on the adverse impact of the impostor syndrome. So what can be done to counter its effects?

■ **NAME IT.** Whether you call it impostor syndrome or an alias (i.e., Chicle), there is tremendous power in recognizing it. As J.K. Rowling, author of "Harry Potter", once said, "Always use the proper names for things... Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself." It's really a "thing."

■ **NORMALIZE IT.** Remember, that others experience impostorism no matter how incredibly brilliant and successful they are. For instance, writer and poet Maya Angelou once said, "I have written 11 books, but each time I think, 'Uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out.'" Or Academy Award-winning actor, Tom Hanks, who mentioned that no matter what he's accomplished, he's thought, "When are they going to discover that I am, in fact, a fraud and take everything away from me?" When

Chicle starts rearing its ugly head, it helps to think of these individuals. Despite being in the highest echelons of their fields, they experience self-doubt, feel like they got to where they are by sheer luck not talent and fear that eventually people will discover that they are not who they think they are.

■ **(ATTEMPT TO) UNDERSTAND IT.** Where exactly do these impostor feelings come from? It's a question that I've often pondered and found useful in coping with the effects of impostorism. We may or may not understand the underlying causes of our feeling like impostors. I have come to understand that at the core is my belief that I do not belong in academia because I don't necessarily fit the profile.

When I start feeling intimidated and thinking I am not at the same level as others, it helps me to remember what U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor said about comparing herself to other justices. She noted, "It is very, very difficult coming from a background like mine not to feel a bit intimidated. No, I may not be cultured in the same way. I may never be Ruth Bader Ginsburg and have her total recall of opera, but I do my own thing and it has value too...If you're comparing yourself to others you're often going to find yourself short on something, especially if they have a background different from your own. But you're there for a reason—you're there to do something that's unique to you." Do you and only you.

■ **EMBRACE IT.** I realize Chicle may never go away, and have learned to embrace it. When Chicle visits me, I no longer allow it to paralyze me. I see Chicle's presence—the self-doubt and feelings of insecurity—as a sign of stepping into greatness. As Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, author of "This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President," said, "The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams don't scare you, they aren't big enough." Now, the only fear that is greater than being discovered as a fraud is losing my friend Chicle.