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Female Scientist Pioneer Reviews NAS Report, Strategies for Success

By Theresa Defino

Taking control and drawing strength—and plans—from like-minded peers are among the ways women, particularly those of color, can have more successful careers in science and medicine. “Form a posse,” suggested Rita Colwell, drawing on her long tenure as a research scientist and leader, including serving as the first female National Science Foundation director from 1998 to 2004.

“What is a posse? It’s a group of at least three, preferably more, like-minded friends who can make the worst situation tolerable...they can actually offer actions to take in your discussions and interactions,” said Colwell, a distinguished professor at the Center for Bioinformatics and Computational Biology at University of Maryland, emeritus.

Last month, the NIH Office of Research on Women’s Health held a half-day virtual forum to celebrate 10 institutions whose programs recently won the NIH Prize for Enhancing Faculty Gender Diversity in Biomedical and Behavioral Science.^[1] RRC will explore the winning programs in more detail in subsequent issues.

At the conclusion of the forum, Colwell offered her thoughts^[2] and described a report issued just before COVID-19 took hold in spring 2020 by the National Academies of Sciences (NAS), Engineering, and Medicine.^[3]

Colwell: Women Should Take Control

Colwell, who, along with a co-author, published her memoir, *A Lab of One’s Own: One Woman’s Personal Journey Through Sexism in Science*, in 2020, said she also wanted to share with the forum participants some of her experiences and “lessons learned from my own life.”

In addition to the “posse” suggestion, Colwell said it is important to understand that “it’s not personal; it’s the system.” To thrive, women need to “train ourselves,” which means to “take control and not allow circumstances to control you,” she said.

Promising Practices for Addressing the Underrepresentation of Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine: Opening Doors, according to the NAS description, “reviews and synthesizes existing research on policies, practices, programs, and other interventions for improving the recruitment, retention, and sustained advancement into leadership roles of women in these disciplines.”

Colwell noted that the winners—whose prize also brought them \$50,000—had implemented many of the principles in the report. These include collecting and monitoring data, adopting data-driven approaches, reducing barriers to career advancement, and “creating a respectful and inclusive organizational climate,” she said.

“The *Promising Practices* report was written in response to the persistent and disturbing problem of women, specifically women of color, being severely underrepresented in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] and in the medical field,” Colwell said. The report also addresses why more progress hasn’t been

made and offers recommendations for the future.

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