Innovation through Propagation: Pathways to Studying Engineering, Retention and Diversifying the Learning Community

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Susan M. Lord received a B.S. from Cornell University and the M.S. and Ph.D. from Stanford University. She is currently Professor and Chair of Electrical Engineering at the University of San Diego. Her teaching and research interests include electronics, optoelectronics, materials science, first year engineering courses, feminist and liberative pedagogies, engineering student persistence, and student autonomy. Her research has been sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Dr. Lord is a fellow of the ASEE and IEEE and is active in the engineering education community including serving as General Co-Chair of the 2006 Frontiers in Education (FIE) Conference, on the FIE Steering Committee, and as President of the IEEE Education Society for 2009-2010. She is an Associate Editor of the IEEE Transactions on Education. She and her coauthors were awarded the 2011 Wickenden Award for the best paper in the Journal of Engineering Education and the 2011 Best Paper Award for the IEEE Transactions on Education. In Spring 2012, Dr. Lord spent a sabbatical at Southeast University in Nanjing, China teaching and doing research.

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Work in Progress - Innovation through Propagation:
Improving and Diversifying Pathways

Introduction
Round 1 of the Delphi study of the critical unsolved problems facing engineering education research, described elsewhere\(^1\), included a question on barriers related to “improving and diversifying the pipeline”. Several respondents pointed out that the pipeline metaphor has been challenged in the community for its rigidity and expressed a preference for the “pathways” metaphor, which suggests multiple routes instead of a single route. The pathways metaphor is consistent with the literature.\(^2,3\)

For round 2 of the Delphi study, the prompt was changed to “pipeline and pathways”. As a result of the Delphi study, these five primary barriers and needs emerged related to improving and diversifying pathways of engineering students as follows.

A. Study the root causes of why engineering remains a primarily white, male field, identify institutions that have successfully broken the stereotype, and determine how they did it.
B. Identify and study those engineering schools and programs that have made substantial progress in increasing under-represented student populations, and determine their best practices.
C. Initiate and synthesize engineering education research focused on the "neglected" cohorts (e.g., LGBTQA, disabled, low income).
D. Determine why some engineering fields are more attractive to under-represented cohorts than other fields.
E. Examine the culture and faculty attitudes of those engineering areas that are least diversified and those that are highly diversified in order to identify best practices and incentives for changing the culture and climate as a first step of increasing the pipeline.

When we think of pathways for engineering students, we typically think of starting in pre-kindergarten and advancing through primary and secondary schools into post-secondary institutions and then the workplace. This paper focuses on pathway impediments occurring as students progress through post-secondary education, specifically four-year colleges. We acknowledge that the other areas are critically important, but we need to limit the scope here. We believe this scope is appropriate because the primary audience for this paper comprises engineering faculty (practitioners of education), engineering administrators (deans, department chairs), classroom innovators, and engineering education researchers.

The four foci that resulted from these critical problems in the four-year college setting are structural issues, data-driven research, academic leadership, and knowledge transfer. We discuss each focus area in more detail in the next section.

Discussion
Structural Issues
Some of the most important influences on engineering students’ pathways through four year colleges are structural: admissions, curriculum, sequencing and scheduling of classes, credit
hours, faculty pedagogy, diversity of the faculty, classroom climate. And it may be easy to recognize these issues when depicted and explained in a structural framework that maybe perceived as abstract, distant concepts. However what is less easy is to acknowledge a role and discuss or impact change on these issues within the structure when using terms such as racism, sexism or classism.

Why are we so uncomfortable using terms such as racism? Perhaps when we use the term racism, people feel that we are making a critical and negative judgment about them as individuals. Another reason may be level of comfort. We are reluctant as engineers to address this issue head on, access the literature, and discuss such topics in a way that will gain a better understanding of racism in the same way sociologists do, for example. However, by not naming racism, we allow racism to persist.

**Data Driven Research**

Data driven research is crucial to elucidate many pathway impediments in engineering, inform the community and move toward strategies for improvement. It is important that this research takes multiple forms: large quantitative studies, small qualitative investigations and personal self-reflections. We need to expand the categories of data we collect, where possible, including generation in college status, veteran status, disability, LGBTQA (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and ally or asexual). We also need to collect demographic variables aligned with our current understanding of people's experiences and identities. For instance, we need to mindful of modern definitions of gender including gender fluidity and transgender. With detailed, modern categories, we would have the data to analyze through the lens of intersectionality, which emphasizes intersections between forms or systems of oppression. Intersectionality studies disaggregate categories such as "underrepresented minority" and "women," which hide the experiences and stories of distinct groups such as Latino males and African American females. We realize gathering this data is difficult in engineering given the small populations of some groups, but this is not an excuse and underscores the need for multi-institutional data sets and qualitative research focused on small numbers.

As we broaden the definition of diversity and consider more groups or more dimensions, we should be mindful that we still have much work to do for groups whom we have been failing for years specifically African Americans/Black and Latino/as.

**Academic Leadership**

We believe academic leaders such as administrators and faculty have control over many structural and institutional impediments to diversifying the pathways of engineering students. When leaders believe change is necessary and become involved, the process of change can begin on fronts such as hiring more diverse faculty, changing admission to attract diverse students, and fostering an inclusive environment. Therefore, we may need basic research focused on administrators and faculty to examine engagement and beliefs around these matters. This research may include investigating faculty beliefs about problems such as structural and institutionalized racism, heteronormativity and sexism. For instance, research may identify their positions on the attitudinal continuum of antagonist to aware to ally to advocate on various dimensions of diversity and inclusion. Another area of research could be strategies to move individuals along this continuum.
Knowledge Transfer
Examples of effective practices informed by evidence are necessary to serve as catalysts for ideas for faculty and administrators as they seek models to transfer to their institutions. There may be useful examples from educational institutions and models from industrial practice that may improve the impediments discussed above. The recent book *Solving the Equation: The Variables for Women’s Success in Engineering and Computing* describes the example of Harvey Mudd College, where changing institutional structures and environments increased the representation of women. This book summarizes research in the engineering workplace showing culture was the major reason why women stayed or left an engineering career. The book also provides recommendation for actions targeted at specific groups such as employers, men in engineering and computing, women in engineering and computing, university administrators, government, parents, and policy makers.

Therefore, we call for more examples and models supported by research and the adoption and/or adaptation of these examples and models. We further acknowledge the need to adapt knowledge transfer models into practices for administrators and faculty that take into account unique organizational contexts.

Conclusion
We have highlighted and discussed four foci related to improving and diversifying engineering pathways in college: structural issues, data driven research, academic leadership and knowledge transfer. We look forward to receiving input from the community to advance the discussion.

References