

From Misconceptions to Seeing Further



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Growing up, my high school guidance counselors and many other adults insisted that engineering “wasn’t for girls.” They discouraged me and my female peers from taking Calculus because “why would a girl like you need to take a class like that?” On registration day my freshman year of college, I was even told in no uncertain terms by a member of the engineering faculty that I was in the wrong building and I might be happier “across campus.”

Fortunately, I knew to ignore such awful advice due to the influence of my father, a civil engineer who founded and ran a consulting firm for many years. I inherited his love of math and science and knew from growing up in the business that civil engineering was something I absolutely could do. I began my engineering career sweeping the floors of his office after school, and eventually graduated to draftsman (Before AutoCAD!) and engineering apprentice in the summers during college.

From the time I graduated with my bachelor of science in civil engineering in 1985 (one of two women in my class) and for the first two decades of my career, I rarely had the opportunity to work with female peers. There just were not that many of us.

However, when I joined the Texas A&M Transportation Institute (TTI) in 2006, I finally experienced what it was like to work with and be supported by other women. Truly, I did not know what I had been missing until I had it. But still, I was accustomed to being either the only woman or one of a very few women in the room at ARTBA and other professional meetings.

Council’s Beginnings

Ten years ago, I was asked to lead the Women Leaders Council as its founding chair. I had just concluded a term as president of ARTBA’s Research & Education Division and on its board. It occurred to me that everyone deserves a peer support system like the one I had come to appreciate at TTI, and that for ARTBA and the transportation construction industry to thrive, we had to create that structure for women.

Adding to my resolve was the realization that the well-documented workforce challenges in our profession could only be addressed through tapping the abilities of more diverse personnel. Women are half of our population, but one only needs to look around at an engineering or construction conference to see that we are still significantly underrepresented in our profession.

I accepted the challenge of leading this new initiative, and the council, made up of a small but determined group of women, immediately began to work on a strategic plan. After much discussion, we decided to focus on raising the profile of women in ARTBA and within the transportation design and construction industry. We also wanted to provide a welcoming space and a path to active membership and leadership roles for women in ARTBA.

Our awards program has been a tremendous success. It has provided encouragement and recognition for companies providing a positive environment for women, for women who have made significant impacts over the course of their careers, and for up-and-coming young women in our profession. The path to ARTBA leadership through the council has also been effective. Women are now well-represented in leadership roles at all levels of ARTBA, from the Executive Committee to the Board of Directors to the working groups and divisions.

Ten years later, we are making a difference.

Seeing Further

In 1675, Sir Isaac Newton said, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” In my case, any success I have enjoyed has been due to the guidance and direction of many “giants,” including my father, James C. Summerlin, Rear Adm (Ret.) Jack Buffington, Dr. Robert Elliott, Dr. Dennis Christiansen, Dr. Herb Richardson, Mr. Gene Griffith, and many others. I am forever grateful to all of them.

It is my hope that in the future, through the opportunities provided through ARTBA’s Women Leaders Council and other diversity-enhancing initiatives, women coming up through the ranks of the transportation design and construction industry will be able to see further with the support of female giants as well. The continued success of our profession depends on it.

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