

Leaning into Leadership

Rutman/Och Initiative at Paul College teaches importance of gender diversity in the workplace

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“WE HAVE THREE DAUGHTERS, AND SO CREATING SOMETHING FOCUSED ON WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP TIED EVERYTHING TOGETHER FOR US,” SAYS DONOR TARA RUTMAN. For Molly Richardson ’21, receiving a scholarship through the Rutman/Och Advancing Women’s Leadership Initiative in Paul College didn’t simply help pay her tuition. It set her up for professional success as a leader in whatever workplace she enters.

“I feel incredibly more confident heading out into the ‘real world’ in combating instances of gender bias and gender discrimination,” says Richardson, a hospitality major. “Having the background that this program has provided me will help me be a better person, employee and leader. My UNH career truly would have been altered without this experience.”

Created in 2018 with a \$1.7 million investment from J. Morgan Rutman '84, president of Willoughby Capital Holdings, his wife Tara Rutman, and the Och Family Foundation, the Rutman/Och Advancing Women's Leadership Initiative focuses on educating high-performing young leaders who are committed to promoting women's leadership in business and economics.

Today, women hold only 8% of the CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies, and 22% of board seats. Similarly, the representation of women in business and economics education nationally and at Paul College has remained at or below 40%.

For the Rutman family, and for Paul College Dean Deborah Merrill-Sands, those were troubling numbers. “Clearly there's a gender bias that pervades our society, as there is a racial bias that pervades our society,” says Morgan Rutman. “It really hits home for us, having three daughters, and so we try to do our part in overcoming these biases, and the best way to do that is through education.”

A group of Rutman/Och Fellows completed a survey recording instances of gender-based microaggressions in Paul College classrooms. They compiled the results into a presentation to academic chairs — and Dean Merrill-Sands was impressed. “I think their eyes were opened, and it was very powerful to see as a dean. They are helping the faculty who shape the culture understand the dynamics of gender bias.”

In addition to financial support for the 12-15 students chosen as Rutman Fellows each year, hallmarks of the program include dedicated advising, mentoring, internship support and programming focused on gender diversity and leadership. Rutman Fellows also arrive early for the semester, which creates a strongly bonded cohort each year.

The program aims to graduate more students who value gender diversity and have the aspiration, knowledge, skills and opportunities needed to pursue successful and meaningful careers, ascend into leadership roles and promote women's leadership in their workplaces — ideas that took on new importance during the pandemic, which as of February saw 2.4 million U.S. women leave the labor force.

“I think we're going to have lost a lot of ground, and it's going to be challenging for women to re-enter the labor market,” says Merrill-Sands, a nationally renowned expert on women and leadership and gender dynamics in the workplace. She believes Rutman fellows will be better equipped to handle future conversations with their partners about shared responsibility at home, in a way that some might not have been during the height of the pandemic crisis.

The program's benefits are also present-day apparent: Merrill-Sands credits the program with more gender equity in programs like the Atkins Investment Group (which had its first female leader last year) and the Rines Angel Fund. “Because of this initiative, we're preparing students, particularly women, to go into an organization and

see a leadership track for themselves,” she says. “As a business school, we’re preparing future managers, male or female, to identify the subtle and not-so-subtle gender issues playing out there and preparing them to be better manager to encourage gender diversity.”

Tara Rutman adds that beyond the undergraduate impact, another goal of the Rutman/Och program is to see its lessons travel far beyond the participants in the program.

“We wanted to create a multiplier effect, so that the students are sharing with others outside the program the things they’ve learned and experienced,” she says. “We might not know that larger ripple effect for 5 or 10 or 15 years, but this is a great beginning.”

As for recent grad Molly Richardson, who was thankful to be part of the fellows program? She’s well on her way to post-grad success: She was accepted into the competitive Manager in Training program with Four Seasons, based in Maui, Hawaii.

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