

Critical Advice from Critical Voices: Intersectional Insights from Women Navigating Academia

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Abstract

Pursuing doctoral degrees and academic careers in STEM presents challenges for everyone; however, the nature and intensity of these challenges can vary based on individuals' identities, values, and institutional contexts. Not all scholars receive mentoring or advice that acknowledges intersectional identities or systemic barriers. This paper synthesizes advice gleaned from counterstory interviews with 16 women in STEM fields in the United States, with particular attention to women of color and women whose scholarly work included community engagement. The interviews were conducted between August 2023 and July 2025. Two interviewees were finishing their PhDs, while the others had earned doctoral degrees and were working across a range of academic roles, including tenure-track, non-tenure-track, and leadership positions. The participant group included women who identified as Latina, Black, Asian, Indigenous, and White, and spanned engineering disciplines and closely related STEM fields. The advice clustered into three broad categories: help and support, personal attitudes, and structural factors, with recurring themes related to mentoring and community, persistence and well-being, and learning both formal and informal institutional rules. The paper foregrounds participants' voices through rich quotations. Although these insights reflect experiences shaped by the U.S. higher education context and a particular moment in the policy landscape, they may still offer useful perspectives for others navigating academic pathways in STEM.

Introduction

Advice can help people make wise choices and respond productively to situations during their academic journeys in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This advice often comes from trusted professional mentors. For those who are doctoral students, post-doctoral researchers, or faculty, some of these mentors should be familiar with the local context within a particular department and institution. Professional mentors may not share demographic characteristics that meaningfully shape mentees' experiences. As a result, well-meaning advice that worked for those mentors may be less helpful for mentees from underrepresented groups. Intersectionality Theory [1],[2] supports the idea that advice must be contextualized to individual experiences. In this paper, the advice that successful women in STEM fields would provide to other women pursuing doctoral degrees or academic careers is synthesized. In particular, this advice comes from individuals with unique intersectional identities that are underrepresented in STEM. Rather than offering prescriptive guidance, this paper centers the advice women shared from their own lived experiences, recognizing that such insights were shaped by institutional context and may resonate differently across individuals and settings.

Background

Women of color continue to be underrepresented among faculty in many STEM fields [3]. This is believed to be due to a range of cultural, social, and systemic factors that extend beyond the 'pipeline' of fostering interest and abilities among K-12 students to the climate and conditions in higher education for undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty. This lack of faculty

diversity has impacts on larger efforts to broaden participation in STEM, given the significant role that these women often play in mentoring and outreach programs [4], [5]. For example, Nabi et al.'s [5] review found that “cultural proximity” was particularly important for underrepresented minority students in STEM.

Mentoring has been found to be significant in successful academic journeys [6],[7]. However, a literature review of mentoring in STEM found that common framings ignore challenges faced by women of color [8]. These framings may also perpetuate marginalization [8]. Critical mentoring theory emphasizes that mentorship should acknowledge systemic oppression and support individual agency [9]. Long et al. [10] explored the mentoring networks of 12 tenure-track engineering faculty. They found that some women and underrepresented minority (URM) faculty described mentoring networks that included nonhuman mentors, such as books, workshops, and institutional resources (e.g., ADVANCE). One of the individuals in the study had “mentoring books” listed among past mentoring. There are a number of books that have been published to help educate and foster the success of new faculty members. One mentoring book explicitly acknowledges that the experiences of minority / underrepresented groups in academia often differ from those of “the majority”, and thus the authors of the chapters and editors included “survival tactics” and reflections on “best practices for career progression” [11, p. xxiii].

Advice has only rarely been explicitly studied, particularly when considering advice outside of personalized mentoring contexts. The University of Michigan distinguished between career advice and mentoring [12]. Freedman et al. [13] conducted a study where they asked junior and senior women undergraduates to write letters of advice to younger women in STEM. They analyzed themes in these letters, finding most (but not all) aligned with expectations from other research about succeeding in STEM. Livingston et al. [14] studied the advice that 19 “elite scholars” in the field of management and applied industrial organizational psychology had received, and found they had often ignored that advice in their journeys. Thus, the usefulness of generic advice might be questionable. However, in this case we compiled advice from a unique group of scholars that they would give to other scholars that share some of their under-represented demographic characteristics (e.g., women of color, conducting community-engaged research).

This study is situated within a larger, on-going project funded by the US National Science Foundation’s ADVANCE program, Strategic Partnership for Alignment of Community Engagement in STEM (SPACES). The project seeks to support women faculty in STEM. The project was awarded prior to the Executive Order in January 2025 which prompted federal agencies to end support for programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Critical race theory (CRT) was used as the overall foundation for the ADVANCE SPACES grant. One activity within the project was to better understand the experiences of women faculty of color in STEM and women STEM faculty conducting community-engaged research (CER). This included understanding the decisions of some women with PhDs in STEM fields to leave academia. Aligned with CRT, the project collected counterstories from women with a range of underrepresented intersectional identities to illuminate their academic journeys in STEM. This paper draws on those interviews to share the advice offered by these women. While such advice cannot replace a network of mentors, it may provide perspectives that others find helpful when navigating personally meaningful pathways in STEM.

Research Question

The research question addressed in this study is: what advice do women with complex intersectional identities give to other women that they believe will help them successfully navigate their academic pathways in STEM?

Methods

Counterstories interviews were conducted as part of an ADVANCE grant funded by the National Science Foundation (University of Colorado Boulder IRB Protocol #23-0344). Eligibility criteria included women studying or working at the PhD level or higher in a STEM field in the United States. Recruitment sought participation from women of color and women with experience conducting community-engaged research (CER). Potential participants were identified through publicly available online information including LinkedIn profiles, websites, CVs, and publications. Members of the ADVANCE SPACES team also suggested names. The author then contacted prospective participants directly, primarily by email and occasionally via LinkedIn messages. Some individuals did not respond, while others declined; a small number expressed initial interest but chose not to participate after reviewing the informed consent document.

In total, 20 interviews were conducted. Thirteen interviews took place between August 2023 and March 2024, and seven were conducted between May and July 2025. The interviews were designed to elicit participants' stories about their academic journeys in STEM, consistent with counterstory methods that foreground lived experience. Interview prompts also invited reflection on any experiences with community-engaged research. Near the conclusion of most interviews, participants were asked what advice they would offer to other women (and, when relevant, women of color) in STEM, including those who conduct community-engaged research. The exact wording of this question varied to reflect participants' identities, affiliations, and research activities. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and audio-recorded. The first 13 interviews were conducted by the author, and the remaining seven by a doctoral student in Engineering Education; interviews were 60 to 90 minutes in duration. Due to time constraints, the advice question was not asked in four of the 20 interviews; demographic information is therefore reported only for the 16 participants who were asked this question.

Zoom transcripts were de-identified and manually corrected for accuracy. The author compiled transcript segments related to the advice question. These quotations were lightly edited to remove hesitations (e.g., "um"), repeated words, and false starts, while preserving participants' original meaning and voice. An inductive thematic analysis approach was then applied [15]. This involved open coding to identify emergent patterns in participants' responses. Coding was iterative, with multiple rounds of transcript review to refine and consolidate codes. Using constant comparison across transcripts [16], related codes were grouped into higher-order themes. These themes captured recurring concepts in participants' advice. The process was data-driven, with themes emerging from participants' own language. Individual interviews included 1 to 7 of the 13 advice-related themes, with a median of 4 themes.

Participants

All 16 participants who provided advice at the conclusion of their interviews identified as women / female. These individuals were at different career stages, with Bachelor's degrees earned in 1980 to 2019 at institutions ranging from public to private, and small liberal arts colleges to large research-intensive R1 universities. A few participants had attended community college prior to pursuing a Bachelor's degree. The most junior women were finishing their PhD degree (n=2) while others were very senior (e.g., a dean; one had held multiple roles inside and outside academia). All different tenure-track ranks were represented including assistant, associate, and full professors, as well as two department chairs. The institutions for these academic appointments included public and private, R1 and R2 Carnegie Classifications, predominantly white institutions (PWIs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and institutions who had received the voluntary Carnegie Engagement classification. Four interviewees were working professionally outside of academia at the time of the interview (3 for various governmental / public agencies, 1 at a private start-up; 3 had previous post-doctoral and/or faculty positions in academia). In all, 9 interviewees had meaningful work experience outside academia after their Bachelor's degree. Some of the career pathways included a variety of non-tenure track positions in academia (n=5, not including post doctoral positions). The STEM fields of the interviewees spanned engineering (environmental, civil, chemical, mechanical, biomedical, industrial, materials), environmental science, public health, biology, physics, and math. Many of the interviewees had interdisciplinary training across their degrees, which for a few also spanned into non-STEM fields (e.g., Spanish).

The racial/ethnic categories identified by the participants included: 7 Hispanic/Latina, 4 Black, 3 Asian, 2 Indigenous, 2 White, 1 Jewish. Five were born outside the U.S. and three received their Bachelor's degrees outside the U.S.; all of the doctoral degree institutions were U.S.-based. Other intersectional demographics for some individuals included: raised in a low-income / working class background, first-generation in their family to attend college, parent (some became a mother during graduate school and others pre-tenure), religion. Among the 16 interviewees, 11 had or were currently conducting community-engaged research (CER).

Limitations

The first limitation is that this advice is specific to the experiences of those who participated in the interviews. It therefore represents a limited range of intersectional identity characteristics, STEM fields, and largely U.S. higher education contexts. The specific intersectional identities of each individual interviewee are not disclosed in order to provide maximum anonymity to the participants. It is important to note the timing of the interviews. For most of the women, some or all of their STEM academic experiences were when DEI and/or CER were being supported at the federal level. *This advice might be very different today under the current conditions (e.g., federal and some state restrictions on DEI, federal defunding of CER targeting social or environmental justice).* Individuals likely had varying degrees of comfort being fully authentic during the interviews. This may have been influenced by the perceived identities and positionalities of the interviewers. The author is a white woman full professor at an R1 institution, affiliated with civil and environmental engineering and engineering education. The doctoral student who conducted the later interviews is a Black woman with a background in chemical engineering, medicine, and public health.

Results and Discussion

The 13 types of advice provided by the women was roughly grouped into three categories: help / support, personal attitudes, and structural factors. The most common themes, example quotes, and the number of women whose advice fell into this area are summarized in Table 1. The advice themes did not differ noticeably between more junior and senior women, and largely seemed to apply at any academic stage ranging from PhD to senior leadership.

Table 1. Emergent themes of advice to other women in STEM

Theme	Example quote(s)	n
Category: Help / Support		
Mentoring / mentors	"Find mentors of color" (from a current PhD student) "Having mentors has been critical, and I would say to not shy away from reaching out to people..."	11
Ask questions	"Ask questions. ... it isn't about playing nice. I don't think it serves us to be sheep and just follow rules. I think it serves us to be wolves and be aggressive and ask questions."	5
Find community	"find your community first that will support you." "find a community of people you trust, you can talk to, and feel comfortable being completely yourself around them in all ways."	2
Category: Personal Attitudes		
Follow passion / heart / intuition	"think about where [your] passion lies. instead of worrying too much about ...the future... realize where [your] passion is ... and then keep going and be happy."	9
Be persistent	"Follow your intuition. Don't let people tell you it's wrong." "don't let anyone get in your way"	9
Don't compare yourself to others	"Don't compare yourself with others. Everyone has a different journey. Everyone has different goals in their lives."	4
Take care of your mental health	"know your limits and to put your mental health first"	3
Balance life outside of academia	"how to balance [work and being a mom] without feeling guilty" "pursue what you want to pursue and also be a woman at the same time; meaning, if you want to have children, don't let it stop you. You can do it."	3
Say no	"{Be ready to be} used as a poster child again. ... asked to join a hundred different committees because of [your] racial insight... [learn] how [to] say no while you're still trying to climb the ladder..."	2
Protect self / be careful with trust	"...identify people you can relate to and can trust, even if it's outside of your department. Never trust anybody until you know them, truly."	2
Category: Structural Factors		
Research dept / institution for equity / CER before you join	"Do your research. Talk to folks officially or unofficially, who work at the institution, or have worked at the institution or know about it, especially other people of color. Just understand what their experience has been like. Look at who's getting promotion and tenure and what's getting them promotion and tenure. It's very easy for institutions to say they support community-engaged work, they support minority scholars. But do they actually?"	6
Know rules / learn processes early (including unwritten "hidden" realities)	"Learn the evaluation process early. Either by your dean or by your chair, or by a senior faculty member. Just take them to coffee, get to know them, ask them 'what do I need to do to get tenure', very early. find out who is on the RPT committee at the college level and talk to them. What are they looking for, what do they want?"	3
Move to find right fit for you	"Go where you're celebrated, not tolerated.it [could be] a slow process ... finding a place that actually appreciates and values [CER]" "Get out early, if you can get out early and shift instead of being stuck. And then your mental health suffers, your research suffers, your engagement suffers, your family life suffers."	3

Help and Support

Nearly all of the interviewees offered advice that related to getting help and support. Within this category were the themes of mentoring, asking questions, and finding a community to provide a sense of support and belonging.

Many individuals noted the need to be proactive in building a network of mentors. An example quote is:

Having mentors has been critical, and I would say to not shy away from reaching out to people and asking them to have a talk and allowing themselves to be transparent with what they're going through without necessarily oversharing But it's like reaching out to people for mentorship....

Through the stories of their journeys, most of the women shared that they had white male mentors. With only a couple of exceptions (see example quote in Table 1), the women did not report that it was important that mentors be women or women of color. Most participants indicated that multiple mentors were needed, some of whom knew the local department culture. One woman advised:

Know their landscape of the environment that they're going into. Make sure that they have those mentors and sponsors who really value what they do and what they bring to the table, and being willing to speak up for them. And then making sure that you give back to others, because you're always gonna learn as you're talking to people. So you'll learn from them. You'll teach them things. And that just helps you stay rooted and grounded in what you're passionate about, and what you know is right for your career.

One younger scholar gave advice to folks seeking a doctoral advisor, particularly if the potential faculty mentor was a woman of color:

Asking that professor before you are on board, are you available? Are you going to be there for me? [Are they able to] be available for them in the way that they need, not what the professor thinks they need. [Will they have enough time to] just hang? Can we meet? Hang out? Can you give me advice?

While most participants explicitly referred to “mentors” or “mentoring”, interpersonal connections outside the scope of mentoring were also discussed. One participant used the language of allies, “look for allies for support. ... whether you're a female or a male, or minority or not, you can't do it alone, like you need people around you.” The literature discusses the importance of allies [17], and going beyond what may be a shallow level of support to more robust roles as an advocate or accomplice [18].

A number of the women noted the importance of asking questions and asking for support. One woman stated, “it takes a little bit of ... braveness to be able to ask and know what you want and ask for it.” Asking questions is critically important to counter the “foggy climate” regarding the promotion and tenure process that has been previously documented [19].

Asking questions bridges into the personal category, since some women in STEM are reluctant to ask questions, perhaps fearing that others will view this as incompetence or being burdensome

[20]. One of the pieces of advice that fit this category was, “Know that you're not alone [in] this process. there're others who have gone through it, and more than likely are happy to help you out, so don't be afraid to ask for help.”

The individualistic and competitive climate in STEM likely contributes to hesitancy to ask questions. More specifically, women of color may avoid asking questions due to concerns about bias. Peer networks or other affinity groups can be counterspaces that provide safer environments for support [21]. This idea also bridges into structural factors since frequently the system for promotion, tenure, and/or advancement within higher education (including progress through doctoral programs) is not transparently articulated. Asking questions is therefore necessary to learn these unwritten rules.

There was also advice that concerned finding a community. Such connections were described as important for providing a sense of support and belonging. A quote that exemplifies this guidance from a department chair is: “find a community of people you trust, you can talk to, and feel comfortable being completely yourself around them in all ways.” Another senior academic described how it may be lonely if you are somewhere you don't “fit”, and advised “seek external stuff... external interactions.” A similar recommendation was also given by more a junior scholar; among her long list of guidance the very first point was: “find your community first that will support you.” These forms of community were critically important for individuals who might feel a lack of belonging or a sense of outsider status within their department, institution, and/or town. This lack of belonging might be due to one's intersecting identities of gender, race / ethnicity, class, nationality, parental status, religion, or other factors. These accounts reflect the lived realities in which fitting in, masking, and/or being subjected to a continuous “toxic rain” of microaggressions can wear one down emotionally and physically. This emphasis on community may be less important to individuals who feel “at home” in their work and living environments.

Personal Attitudes

The broad area of personal attitudes encompasses a range of different types of advice the women gave, including following one's passions, being persistent, taking care of mental health, balancing personal life and career, saying no, and being cautious with trust (see Table 1).

The most popular recommendation related to following one's passions in terms of work topics (like CER, mentoring students) and being persistent. Some guidance related to pursuing personal scholarly interests; three examples are:

Be driven by love and not by fear. That's one big one. Just to seek this inner fire within us that knows and to trust this inner fire of knowing, however challenging things can be, and however scary things can be. There's a tremendous source of energy in this inner fire and trusting. That is definitely something that is true. It's a journey and it's not an easy one.

Don't dull down who they are, or their opinions, or what their research is just because they don't think it's fundable.

A relentless belief that what you're doing, it really matters, and that you want to do it. And then just pick something that you're passionate about.

One of the women who conducted CER stated:

Believe it until you make it. Believing that you are capable of doing the work that you were trained [to do] because you did put in all that hard work. You were trained properly to do the work. That you have valuable skills and natural talents to do the work that no one else has. And that is okay to use [to] your advantage those valuable personal talents that you have in your work.

Several of the pieces of advice reflected a sense that some of the core interests of the interviewees were not “average” or typical for many tenure-track positions in academia. Thus, pursuit of these non-traditional areas also required one to be persistent – both in ignoring advice to the contrary and defining novel ways to be successful. The participants encouraged other women to be resilient. One interviewee reflected, “You're stronger than you think you are. And if you gotta have a cry, have a cry. But you are stronger than you think you are.”

This also aligned with the notion of not comparing oneself to others. For many of the women, they defined success for themselves in ways that some in academia would consider atypical (not just bringing in grant money, publishing lots of academic papers that were widely cited by others, for example). Balancing work and life also fits this area, with suggestions from some who felt criticized for working too hard (e.g., “Be happy in terms of the work ethic that you do and be true to your work ethic. ... I want to have my work be reflective of me.”) and others who felt criticized for having a family and protecting that personal time. Many shared perspectives related to balancing a family and academia; with one woman particularly passionate about this:

Pursue what you want to pursue and also be a woman at the same time. Meaning, if you want to have children, don't let it stop you. You can do it. And there's always going to be someone that's going to be supportive. You've just got to find them. Being a mother is very important, just as important as your PhD. ... the childbearing age is going away. ... My advice is to stay a scientist and stay a woman, and you can find that balance. Don't let anybody tell you [that] you have to be more of a scientist than a woman. Don't let one take over the other per se. You can do both.

It was clear that pursuit of less traditional paths in academia might lead to significant stress (coupled with being targeted by various microaggressions). Thus, three women were explicit in offering guidance related to taking care of one's mental health. (More women than these three had noted significant stress and seeking medical help at times during their professional lives but did not refer to mental health in the advice question response.)

A particular area of advice given by two women related to saying no. Interestingly, these explicit statements were from one of the most senior and one of the more junior women among those interviewed. The senior scholar was very concise in her initial answer to the question.

Interviewer: What advice would you give ... to new women faculty getting hired in ... engineering today?

Respondent: Follow your heart, you know, and don't let anyone get in your way. And say No.

The more junior person had opted out of academia after all that she had seen. She had a lot of advice and the seventh topic was “[learn] how [to] say no while you’re still trying to climb the ladder...” Saying no reflects a large body of literature that women faculty and people of color are often over-burdened with service [22], [23]. They are asked to sit on committees, participate in outreach to K-12 schools, and similar tasks at higher rates than majority male peers. These activities are known to be undervalued in promotion and tenure. Thus, be brave and say no to service that can easily overwhelm your time. One message that captured this theme was:

Have grace. Grace in yourself. Sometimes **you can't do everything**. Sometimes there's things out of your control ... in your work.

The final personal attitude related to being careful with trust. This theme clearly emerged from participants’ experiences with having their trust betrayed. A senior-level department head stated, “Ask questions. ... identify people you can relate to and can trust, even if it's outside of your department. Never trust anybody until you know them, truly.” Similarly, some participants emphasized following one’s intuition when navigating relationships. Prior research has documented how women of color experience breaches of trust and institutional betrayal in higher education [24], [25]. In this context, being cautious with trust appears to be a protective and pragmatic strategy.

Structural Factors

Some of the guidance from the participants related primarily to structural factors. This reflected the fact that institutions (and departments within institutions) have unique goals and culture which may align to a greater or lesser degree with the personal values of women. These structures were significant at all career stages, including for PhD students, post-doctoral scholars, and various faculty ranks. Reflecting back on her PhD, one scholar’s second piece of advice was, “Read the Handbook and know your rights.”

Structural aspects may not be readily apparent in websites or during interviews, and so digging was required to acquire a true understanding of local conditions. This extended more explicitly to acknowledging that important information was often not written down. This reflected a hidden curriculum [26],[27] or foggy conditions [19]. But it also represented a potential for exploitation when “rules” were in fact not rules, changed over time, and/or these norms did not seem to be applied equally to everyone. Some individuals gave advice which indicated that it was unreasonable to expect to fully understand lived realities before joining a department. Perhaps no one else in the department had the same identities or values as the person. Therefore, once someone learned they did not really “fit” somewhere, interviewees encouraged women to be open to moving to find a work environment that both valued them and aligned with their values (versus just feeling stuck and tolerating a bad situation). One of the longer quotes can be paraphrased to “carefully consider if the institution is genuinely interested and able to support you, or just bringing you in as a [diversity] number.” One scholar also noted that women of color should think carefully before choosing to pursue a PhD degree in STEM, as the personal costs might be very high and it may not actually help them reach their goals; “you should think about it, actually. With what you want to do, do you require that doctoral [degree]?”

Blended Advice

Some of the insights shared by participants spanned to multiple categories. For example, the quote below merges personal values with structural factors:

Figure out a way to be successful at your institution without feeling like you are giving away a piece of yourself or not being able to be who you are. It's important to figure out how to be who you are in the context of whatever institution you are at.

Another reflection bridged all three categories:

[Be] strategic sometimes. And ... it isn't about playing nice. I don't think it serves us to be sheep and just follow rules. I think it serves us to be wolves and be aggressive and ask questions.

Here, understanding institutional structures was intertwined with seeking help by asking questions and with personal orientations such as assertiveness and strategic action.

The paraphrased guidance from one scholar might be worth revisiting at multiple points along an academic journey:

Everybody has their own path. ...Just be open minded.

Reach out [for help].

Focus on the moment and think about where [your] passion lies. find out what we truly care about and [are] truly passionate about instead of worrying too much about ...the future, the things that have not happened yet. ... realize where [your] passion is ... and then keep going and be happy.

Conclusion

Working toward a PhD and building a career in STEM (inside or outside of academia) presents challenges for everyone, regardless of gender or background. At the same time, these challenges can be shaped in distinct ways by individuals' identities, values, and the institutional contexts in which they work. In this study, women in STEM—particularly women of color and those whose scholarly work emphasized community engagement—shared advice they would offer to others navigating academic pathways. Their advice clustered into three overarching areas: securing help and support (e.g., mentors, community, asking questions), cultivating sustaining personal approaches (e.g., persistence, following one's intuition, protecting mental health, setting boundaries), and anticipating structural realities (e.g., researching departmental fit and learning both formal and informal rules). Together, these insights offer practical ideas that individuals may draw upon as they interpret experiences, make decisions, and engage in conversations about their academic and professional trajectories.

Beyond informing individual decision-making, these findings also point to concrete actions that institutions can take to better support women in STEM, particularly women of color.

Participants' advice underscores the importance of transparent promotion, tenure, and evaluation processes; recognition and reward of community-engaged and relational labor; and the cultivation of mentoring ecosystems rather than reliance on single advisors. While these insights are grounded in the U.S. higher education context, challenges related to institutional opacity, misalignment between stated and enacted values, and uneven recognition of labor are evident

across a range of national and cultural settings. At the same time, higher education systems vary considerably, suggesting that institutional responses must be interpreted and enacted in ways that are responsive to local policies, norms, and constraints.

The counterstories shared in this study reflect important variation in how women navigate academic pathways. While many emphasized the value of mentors, community, and support networks, at least one participant described forging a successful path largely on her own, without trusted mentors or institutional allies. This range of experiences underscores that no single set of ideas will resonate equally with everyone. Rather than prescribing a formula for success, this paper offers a collection of perspectives that readers may find more or less useful depending on their circumstances, goals, and contexts. At the same time, a recurring theme across these narratives was a commitment not only to navigating existing systems, but to reshaping academic environments in ways that align more closely with deeply held values. It is hoped that these reflections provide language, validation, or inspiration that some readers can carry forward — whether to navigate their own paths, support others, or imagine more humane and equitable futures in STEM.

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