How a Dean Got Over Impostor Syndrome — and Thinks You Can, Too

By Nell Gluckman  |  NOVEMBER 26, 2017

Almost anyone would say that Valerie Sheares Ashby is in the midst of a successful academic career. After more than a decade on the chemistry faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and three years as chair, she became dean of Duke University's college of arts and sciences in 2015. She’s won many accolades, including awards from the National Science Foundation and the companies 3M and DuPont, as well as several teaching prizes from UNC.

But for most of her professional life, Ms. Ashby experienced impostor syndrome, a phenomenon first described by psychologists in the 1970s. It’s not an official diagnosis but "a very real and specific form of intellectual self-doubt," according to the American Psychological Association. It’s common among high achievers who may consider their accomplishments flukes, or attribute them to luck.
rather than to their own merit.

Over time, by practicing 10 strategies, Ms. Ashby learned to overcome her impostor syndrome. She now gives talks at colleges to help students and professors identify and resist the strong tendency to discount their own skills and talent. She spoke with The Chronicle about her experience with academic and professional self-doubt and what hope there is for others who may feel like frauds about to be found out.

What was your experience with impostor syndrome?

Until I was 43 — I'm 51 now — I pretty much carried impostor syndrome throughout my career. It is painful. At the time, I didn't really know what it was. If you had asked me, I would have told you. This is just who I am. I didn't know it was a thing that probably every person sitting in the room with me was carrying.

"Carrying" it — what does that mean?

Whenever I run a workshop, I ask people, How many of you know what impostor syndrome is? A few of them do. I say, OK, well, I'm going to describe some things, and you put your hand up if you think I've called your name. I say things like, How many of you are coming into work every day thinking, I don't deserve to be here? How many of you are thinking, They — and you never know who "they" are — are going to find out I'm not supposed to be here? Or, I'm not as qualified as they think I am?

How many of you love a compliment for about 10 seconds, but on the 11th second, you're thinking, Oh, my God, they think I can actually do this? How many of you are such perfectionists that if you do 10 things right and one thing wrong, you can't think of anything except for that one wrong thing? How many of you don't know how to say no, because you have to be everything to everybody, for fear that if you don't do something, you're not as good?

By the time I get there, usually 99 percent of the people sitting in any room have raised their hands. And I'm usually talking
to undergraduates, graduate students, or faculty members. High achievers. It’s a strange phenomenon.

**How did you, at 43, identify this in yourself?**

I happened to be looking on the internet for some other information, and I ran across this phrase, "impostor syndrome."

I started reading, and I thought, That’s it.

That’s the thing. I found these 10 steps for working on it, which I use every time I give a talk on this. They’re simple things, but you just do them over and over again, and it goes away.

**Really, it goes away?**

It took me probably about a year of just practicing. For example, when you make a mistake, you actually have to tell somebody. Usually, when those of us who have impostor syndrome make a mistake, we clean it up faster than you can imagine. We’d rather clean it up than for you to know. But you’ve got to tell somebody. And then you have to watch what happens. They don’t die. It feels like they’re going to, but you don’t die, and they don’t die.

It’s practical things. Learning how to celebrate every good thing that happens, because we will downplay the good and play up the bad. When you’re playing a tape that’s negative over and over again in your mind, ask someone, Does this make any sense to you? And they’ll say, That makes no sense. What do you mean, you’re not qualified? Changing the tape is critical.

After about a year, I remember walking to my office thinking, I don’t think I feel like this anymore. The tape in my mind had changed to: Everybody has different talents. I’m equally as qualified to be here as anybody else. They want me to be me, or else they wouldn’t have hired me. The mistakes still hurt, but I try to voice them as quickly as possible with somebody who can help. But the idea that I am not good enough? Pssh. It

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just doesn’t exist.

**What changed for you after that?**

I really don’t think I could have started down this path in academic administration and leadership without getting over impostor syndrome. This was before I took on my first significant role, which was chair of the chemistry department at UNC-Chapel Hill. I think I would have said no.

The things that come along with impostor syndrome are really challenging in leadership: perfectionism, people-pleasing, not being able to get over mistakes, second-guessing your own judgment. You can’t do that in leadership. Or expect those things in other people, because everything is a reflection on you, which means everyone around you needs to get it right.

As a leader, if a few people are not happy with you all the time, you’re doing a good job. That would have been impossible for me to sit with. You cannot be a control freak in this job.

**Are some people more susceptible to impostor syndrome?**

Certainly high achievers. I thought at one time it might have been more underrepresented minority students. It turns out that wasn’t the case in my experience.

We had this program at UNC called the Chancellor’s Science Scholars, which is for the best of the best scientists. Many of them are majority students. Same. I go talk to newly appointed assistant professors on the tenure track. Same.

I was sitting at a table once with my own Ph.D. adviser, Joe DeSimone, who by anybody’s stretch is one of the best scientists ever.

I heard him say to somebody else, You know, I have impostor syndrome. I knew this, but to hear him actually say it, I was like, You are in three national academies! You’ve won every prize there is in science! But it’s not that. It is the sense that, My version of what I bring might not be the valued version, the right version, the respected version.

**What do you hear from others who attend your talks on this subject?**
Every time I step in the room, I’m thinking, This time I’m going to be the only one. They’re going to look at me like I have three heads. That never happens. Every time people can relate to what I’m saying.

I’d say that 90 percent of the time that I give this talk, somebody comes up to me in tears. It’s overwhelming to people. They hear me call it out, and they think, Oh, my goodness, that’s me.

They mostly want to know how in the world they move forward. I don’t know the answer. But we talk about the first thing that they can do, as opposed to trying to figure it all out at once. Usually they have supporters — mentors or friends who already know this is happening to them. I needed the people around me who could help me through my bad thinking about this.

**Is this a problem that individuals must overcome on their own? Or can institutions help?**

Well, we as institutions can certainly try not to exacerbate it. For those of us who actually walk around feeling this way, all it takes is one professor in a classroom to embarrass you. All it takes is one professor to tell you that your question didn’t make any sense or wasn’t valid. What that tells you is, There’s the evidence that I was right all the time.

But I think it’s individual work, quite frankly. I don’t say that working those 10 steps cures the world. It just worked for me. You shouldn’t settle for feeling like that. It can absolutely be better. It takes some work, but you should decide to do the work, because it’s so worth it to be free and comfortable. And it allows you to do even more.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

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