

What's Your Legacy?



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At a recent AIChE annual meeting, the incoming division chair presented a recognition plaque to one of the outgoing board members. Upon thanking the new chair, the departing member joked, “One day my kids are going to wonder what to do with all these things.” A chuckle went through the room; everyone knew exactly what he meant. As the spouse of a colleague once observed, we all have “I Love Me” walls at work or at home on which we display our framed certificates and plaques. The entrepreneurial academic culture is individually focused on publications, grants, awards for research and teaching, and “best paper” recognitions. Faculty candidates are scrutinized based on their number of thesis and post-doctoral papers. The reward system in academia doesn’t help; it mainly reinforces those things that can be easily counted and displayed. Professors have been seduced by titles, awards, and indices away from what really matters—making a long-lasting impact on the lives of our students and colleagues.

At my (hopefully distant) retirement, either my family or I will load all the plaques and certificates on my office wall into a box, which will go in the attic and sometime later be discarded. At my retirement reception, when my colleagues and former students talk about me, I hope they will talk about my real legacy—the difference I made in the lives of my colleagues and students.

What will your colleagues and former students talk about at your retirement party? What would you like them to talk about?

Here are some examples of how to be intentional about your legacy and leave your imprint on the lives of others:

- *Support younger colleagues at your institution and within your field. Serve as a teaching or research mentor, encourage them to apply for*

leadership positions that might stretch them, and nominate them for awards. Think about a role you’re currently filling, such as a highly visible committee chair, that could provide an opportunity for a junior colleague to develop and grow.

- *Invest in your students—not only the “stars,” but also those who are struggling. Be especially aware of students who have missed class or are doing poorly; invite them to meet with you, express concern, and ask them what might be going on to affect their performance. Often you will find that your sincere interest causes them to open up about their situations, and you might then be able to offer helpful guidance.*
- *On your website and the bulletin board outside your office, look for ways to affirm the accomplishments of the graduate students and undergraduate researchers in your group.*
- *Take the time to write a personal note or email to colleagues who have received recognition.*
- *Stay in touch with former students and celebrate their accomplishments and important life events.*
- *Donate money to your department or university to support something that is important to you—perhaps an endowed lectureship, an undergraduate scholarship, a graduate fellowship, or support of the AIChE student chapter.*

There’s nothing wrong with papers and awards and plaques—they recognize excellence and encourage contributions to our universities and our discipline. However, the real opportunity to make a lasting difference lies in your relationships, not your resume. While it may be difficult or impossible to quantify, your legacy is what will survive you when your plaques and papers are long forgotten. Instead of focusing exclusively on your next accolade, consider your legacy, and be proactive about making it what you would like it to be. □