



Hirendranath Banerjee (1963-Present)

Professor, Natural Sciences

Elizabeth City State University

“We need strong representation from the minority community in the practice of environmental science.”
- **Hirendranath Banerjee, 2006.**

Overview

Dr. Hirendranath Banerjee is a professor of Natural Sciences at Elizabeth City State University. He teaches courses in Anatomy and Physiology in addition to doing research and training students in his lab. Dr. Banerjee has won numerous grants including three NSF grants and one grant from NASA. He has also won several awards including a National Research Scholarship Award from the NIH in 1998, and the American Association of Cancer Research award as an outstanding minority cancer researcher in 2006.

Early Life and Education

Hirendranath Banerjee has always loved nature. As a child in India, that love was manifested through playing outside in the trees; later in life, that interest was channeled through his work as a biomedical research scientist. “I always knew that I wanted to work in a field that had a positive environmental impact,” Banerjee says. “That dream guided me.”

Banerjee earned a Bachelor of Science with honors in zoology from Calcutta University in 1984, followed by a Bachelor’s in Medicine/Surgery from the same school in 1990. He then decided to pursue graduate studies in the U.S. While working on his master’s thesis in molecular biology at Long Island University, Banerjee got his first job as a research associate International Flavor and Fragrance R&D, where his main duty was to determine the presence of toxic compounds in flavoring. After two years he moved on to lab work for the International Flavor and Fragrance R&D, but ultimately left that position to get his Ph.D. in molecular genetics from Howard University.

Career

After getting his doctorate in 1998, Banerjee did two post-docs, the first at the Yale Medical School and the second at the Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston. In 2000, he received what he calls “a good offer” for a faculty position at a largely-minority university, Elizabeth City State University (ECSU). Having been trained at an HBCU himself (Howard), “I wanted to give something back by training other

minority students,” Banerjee explains. He is currently full professor at ECSU, where he teaches Anatomy and Physiology in addition to doing research and training students in his lab.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Banerjee has a host of mentors who have influenced his development as a scientist and a person. He has been fortunate to have worked with a number of prominent scientists and researchers, including his Ph.D. advisor Dr. S. Dutta, an “excellent mentor” who continues to teach and conduct research at the age of 80; Dr. Lawrence DeLucas, the Director of the Center for Biophysical Sciences and Engineering at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, who supported Banerjee and taught him to write grants in his lab, and with whom Banerjee continues to collaborate with today; and Dr. Günter Blobel, a Nobel prizewinner for his discoveries in the field of hereditary genetics, with whom Banerjee worked at Rockefeller University. “He inspired me a lot and still does,” Banerjee notes. Banerjee was also inspired and influenced by several other people, including Dr. S. Das at the University of Calcutta, his master’s advisor Paul Bullen, and Dr. Ronald Blackmon, now the vice chancellor at ECSU. Banerjee has received some additional inspiration from within his own family: his father-in-law, Dr. B. Mookherjee, is a pioneering chemist who developed the patented “living flower technology” that is now used to make perfume. “He taught me how to be a good scientist,” Banerjee says. “I never work directly under him, but he was a good source of inspiration for me.”

Mentoring Others

Being a mentor himself is a role that Banerjee relishes. “I love working with and educating minority students,” he says. He inspired one student to explore molecular biology and make the switch from entrepreneurship to science; that student now works for the National Institutes of Health. He has also helped several former female students earn summer internships at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. Banerjee proudly notes that over the course of his career at ECSU, he has had six students go on to graduate school or work as scientists in government or private agencies.

Banerjee’s work promoting minority involvement in the sciences also extends beyond ECSU. He is active in the Ronald McNair summer internship program for minority students, teaching students how to do lab research for the past five summers. He is also active in the National Science Foundation’s MEMAPS program, a training program for minority students interested in scientific research. He regularly sends students to the University of Alabama-Birmingham summer research internship program, and recently joined the Faculty and Student Teams (FAST) program that pairs faculty with students on scientific research projects.

Awards

Banerjee has received numerous awards and accolades over the course of his career as a student and academic, including a National Research Scholarship Award from the NIH in 1998, and the American Association of Cancer Research award as an outstanding minority cancer researcher in 2006. He has also received grants from both the NIH and NASA, and was elected department teacher of the year in 2004. Despite such honors, Banerjee says his most significant achievements have been in educating and

mentoring minority students, and being involved in a field where he can have a positive impact. “My work is about trying to better the environment and the lives of people by doing scientific research,” he says.

Advice to Young Professionals

Banerjee strongly encourages minorities to explore opportunities in the environmental sciences. “There is a great need for minority students to come up and get positions within the field of environmental science as researchers and activists,” he says. “Environmental hazards affect us all, but most especially minorities...they affect us in agriculture, fishing and other areas. Current calamities are due to environmental change. We’re responsible for neglecting the environment, and the results that occur. We need strong representation from the minority community in the practice of environmental science.”

For More Information

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This interview was conducted in 2015.