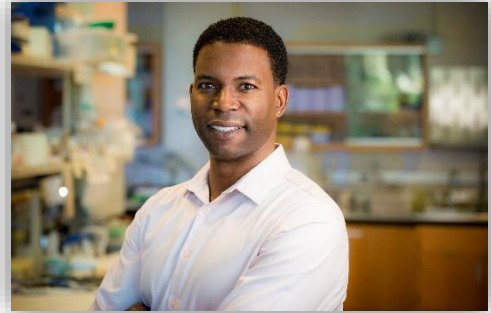


Dr. Gentry N. Patrick

Leadership Story

How does one take a kid from Compton, CA, on a life journey and academic and career path to Full Professor in Neurobiology at UC San Diego by way of UC Berkeley (B.A.), Harvard University (PhD), and postdoctoral studies at California Institute of Technology?...

The answer is simple: Access, Mentorship and Advocacy!



I was born in 1970 in South Central Los Angeles to a single mother of the age 16 and was the first to attend college in my family. I didn't know much about neuroscience, growing up in an environment that was riddled with violence and crime. *I was a smart kid and worked hard but I was not an anomaly*, as many kids from my neighborhood were just as smart and worked just as hard albeit landed on a different trajectory and outcome. Access to quality education was scarce but I was fortunate to have incredibly dedicated teachers/mentors at King Drew Medical Magnet High School in Watts, CA. After matriculating from high school, I attended college at UC Berkeley. My first two years in college proved to be an extremely harsh transition culminating in an initially poor academic record. However, I began to gain much needed mentorship by both faculty and my upper class peers. Gaining access to a research laboratory, initially washing dishware but eventually becoming an active member of a laboratory, kick started my sincere interest in science as a profession. I began to believe that this was something I could actually achieve as a career path.

While I had gained some momentum, if it were not for a single phone conversation in 1994 with Dr. John Watson, the only African American Professor in Biochemistry at UC San Francisco, my poor undergraduate academic record would almost be my undoing. Dr. Watson ran a terminal master's program in the Department of Biochemistry and Biophysics called the Research Training Program. I spent an hour on the phone with Dr. Watson convincing him and by proxy his colleagues to take a chance on me. They did, of course, and to this day Dr. Watson and I remain friends and still marvel what would have been if not for that single phone call.

After completing my master's thesis at UCSF in the laboratory of Dr. Erin K. O'Shea (now President of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute), I went on to complete my Ph.D. in a speedy 3.5 years at Harvard University in the laboratory of Dr. Li-Huei Tsai (now Director of Picower Institute at MIT) and postdoctoral training at Caltech with Dr. Erin Schuman (now Director of Max Planck for Brain Research, Frankfurt, Germany) prior to joining the faculty in the Division of Biological Sciences at UC San Diego in 2004. *Coincidentally, all three of my research advisors were young, ambitious, extraordinarily successful women scientists (all HHMI investigators) who pushed me to do the best science I could, promoted me by sending me to meetings to give talks, encouraged me to apply for prestigious fellowships and made sure I engaged the scientific world by networking with the experts in the field. This mentorship and advocacy was fundamental to my scientific success, creativity and confidence.*

From my experiences and trajectory I've extracted the following generalized correlation for success of an underrepresented minority (URM) in academia: 1) early intervention and mentorship before college is absolutely invaluable; 2) early mentorship (both by faculty and peers) is required during college; 3) It's all about the Science! Early access to research is crucial and establishes one's passion for science; 4) Mentorship during graduate and postgraduate training should include confidence building, proficiency in oral and written communication, visibility and networking; 5) Advocacy and self-advocacy is critical!

In the summer of 2017, I was appointed to the position of full Professor of Neurobiology in the Division of Biological Sciences at UC San Diego. While maintaining an active neuroscience research laboratory (including NIH Review service, journal review, and accepting numerous invited seminar invitations), I have played a major role in the diversity efforts on the UC San Diego campus. Additionally, I engage community (both local and national) in diversity-related efforts and initiatives. I have traveled nationwide to deliver keynote addresses, speaking to both my research as well as the importance of diversity and inclusion-related efforts in institutions of higher education.

I am also proud to have been serving, since 2015, as the Director of Mentorship and Diversity for the Division of Biological Sciences. It is in this position, and as a full Professor at an internationally renowned institution, that I look back on my own trajectory in science and reflect on the critical moments of mentorship and advocacy I received that helped me get to where I am now. The pivotal touch points of mentorship in my life provided me access to a broader understanding of career paths in STEM, a greater confidence in advocating for myself, and opportunities to strive for excellence in my field of study. As Director of Mentorship and Diversity for the Division of Biological Sciences at UC San Diego, I believe in the importance of building an education infrastructure that allows everyone to succeed. We must advocate for students who have demonstrated a commitment to science, but who might not fit into our preconceived notions of a scientist's trajectory.

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