Sometimes the Actuarial Profession Unintentionally Alienates Folks
By Jake Akstins

I never thought I would be where I am today. I grew up in an average setting: middle-class, white, cisgender, had no visible disability, and was raised in a two-parent household. My family's roots were unwavering; we were non-negotiable White Sox fans, as mom and dad were raised on the south side of Chicago. Morals were strong in the household, and education was a top priority. Everything was normal until it wasn't. I believe in the power of social equity and inclusion.

After my freshman year of high school, I was invited to attend the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA). At IMSA, I was challenged beyond belief. I remember that in order to pass the first math class, everyone needed to pass an algebra test. This was a breeze to most, but it took me many, many times…I had to take it over and over again just to score the 60%. In terms of academics, this was my first experience with feeling inferior. I'd have panic attacks every night so bad that I couldn't sleep. I took a deep breath and figured all I could do was my best. I could do it.

I majored in actuarial science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and it was definitely a journey. I had no idea what I was getting into. For example, it was a struggle for me to pay for the exams and study materials (very expensive) while paying for school – and an even larger struggle to find time to study while working. I remember failing an exam during my internship and feeling like I was so much less than everyone else around me. The exams certainly can create a heightened barrier for folks in less-than-ideal situations, and it's easy to give up early if you're the one paying for it and aren't immediately successful.

Today, beyond my 'day job' as an actuary, I'm quite involved in diversity and inclusion initiatives and my company's Pride Employee Resource Group, from both a recruiting and educational perspective. There's more to be done to make people feel included always, but I am proud of the work in action. Seemingly small things like revamping interview question guides, hosting dialogues about workplace issues, and providing education on topics like gender pronouns can have a huge impact. I believe in organizations like the Organization of Latino Actuaries, the International Association of Black Actuaries, and Dive In.

Personally, I still can't help but feel a sense of imposter syndrome at times. It's usually unintentional, but I think about it many nights. I remember crying extensively after a presentation I attended at an insurance conference. The speakers were excellent, but when asked how they got involved in insurance, their reply was the typical, "Well, actually my [family member] was an [insurance professional]." Hearing this time-and-time-again – while true and exciting for folks – has certainly made me feel like an outsider since it often feels like the single story.

Sometimes, I feel this profession unintentionally alienates folks – like 'someone like me', someone who's an LGBTQ actuary from the south suburbs with parents who're successful (just not in the business/insurance profession) just doesn't belong. This notion is certainly true for others in varying situations as well, often to a higher or more complex degree. This motivates me to fight harder even though many days I want to give up. Actuarial work is meant to assist folks in differing situations; let's be intentional to make sure the profession includes these people as well, as with increased bright minds and collaboration we can continue to advance the profession.