

A Phenomenon of Belonging: An Antidote to the Imposter Syndrome

Emily Zechman Berglund, Ph.D., M.ASCE

Emily Zechman Berglund is a professor in the Department of Civil, Construction, and Environmental Engineering at NC State University. She was awarded the 2026 Margaret S. Petersen Award, which recognizes an outstanding woman who has demonstrated exemplary service to the water resources and environmental science and engineering community.

The term imposter syndrome has been a part of the engineering lexicon for much of my career. I remember first hearing the term as a young assistant professor, and I felt it was fitting for what I had experienced. However, I've grown increasingly annoyed with the term over time. While it initially gave me the words to characterize my discomfort, it implied that my feelings of inadequacy were due to my own character flaw or disorder – just another form of inadequacy. It's all in my head, I was made to believe.

The “imposter phenomenon” was coined in 1978 to describe high-achieving women who, despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, “persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise”¹. While the term has come to be applied more broadly as the feelings of being a fraud that both women and men experience, the original concept was rooted in the dogged disparity of women in society. In male-dominated fields, women are responding to a unique systematic message that they don't belong. A leading therapist² characterizes the imposter syndrome in driven women: “It's a trauma-adjacent response to a culture that has systematically questioned their authority from the beginning.” A feeling of fear is a natural response to a disordered culture.

Identifying and naming this syndrome – whether it characterizes me, the engineering culture, or a combined effort of the two – can only go so far. We need an antidote, a pathway to move beyond the imposter syndrome. Moving our focus from the ways that we pose to the ways that we belong can contribute to positive changes in our culture and in the way we internalize our lived experiences³. I have been a student and professor in engineering academia for 30 years, and my feeling of belonging has begun to overtake my feeling of masquerading. Along the way, I've found a few practices that foster this sense of belonging.

¹ Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). *The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention*. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241–247. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006>

² Wright, A. (2026). *Imposter Syndrome in Driven Women: The Complete Guide*. <https://anniewright.com/imposter-syndrome/>

³ Society of Women in Engineering (2025). *SWE'S Legacy Of Cultivating Belonging*. https://swe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/25-SWE-GL-029_2025Report_101625_jc6.pdf

Share your stories.

When I joined NC State as an assistant professor, I was the third woman in the Civil, Construction, and Environmental Engineering Department of about 50 faculty. In my first year, I won a grant to initiate and direct a new event called We are Women in Engineering, or We are WE. We would host a campus visit for women students across the country, featuring a seminar given by a prominent woman in engineering research and held in tandem with an annual research symposium. When I announced this initiative to my department, one colleague pulled me aside. She was the first and only woman at that time to be promoted to full professor in our department, and over coffee, she confessed to me, “I didn’t think we were allowed to talk about being women in engineering.”

I recognize that women who entered the field of engineering academics before me experienced something hard and extraordinary. Whereas the disregard and unwanted attention I experienced in my career were more subtle, they received explicit emails and comments about their appearance, they were unambiguously excluded from opportunities, and they were unconscionably paid less for the same work.

We need to hear the stories of women who walked this pathway before us. It’s a relief when the unsaid is said – these stories confirm that the harassment, the exclusion, and marginalization are real. We can appreciate their hard, extraordinary work and the cultural changes that they’ve plowed. We can identify with themes of grit and determination and be inspired by the engineering prowess of these women. The focus shifts from our own internal processing to shared experiences, belonging, and fulfillment. Let’s be open about what we experienced.

Promote women.

Recently, our department endowed eight fellowships for graduate students. I realized at a late stage that seven of those fellowships were already named after male faculty and a female administrative coordinator. I moved quickly to make sure that the last fellowship was named after the woman who was the first full professor in our department, puzzling at the negligence in the naming scheme. This woman was not only a trailblazer and an important role model for generations of women students, she sustained the core infrastructure of our coastal engineering program for many years.

It’s not in the nature of our culture to seek out women and recognize them for their pioneering excellence in engineering. Of approximately 150 buildings on my campus that have honorific names, three buildings stand out as being named after women. The same networks that have excluded women are needed to promote them, and women find they need to over qualify themselves to receive the recognition that men receive. Due to the entrenched system that has dominated engineering, today’s donors are men, and they are inclined to name large gifts after themselves, their families, and male mentors rather than their female colleagues. In big ways, having more departments, buildings, fellowships, and awards named after women will highlight that women are and should be present in engineering academics.

Find your source of affirmation.

For most of my career, it hasn’t been clear to me where I should go to ask, “Am I doing okay?” When I started my career as an assistant professor at Texas A&M University, I worked in a panic as my inner imposter scrambled to figure out how to keep up. I felt isolated and alone. By my third year, I had found success in funding, mentoring graduate students, and publishing research. I had pushed myself to the limit, and I wanted the go-ahead that I was doing okay. At my reappointment meeting, though,

my department head expressed concern about my research program and focused on the number of unfunded proposals I was writing.

Looking for the affirmation we need in teaching evaluations, annual reviews, journal submissions, grant funding, or the Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion committee is going to be disappointing. Instead, we need to purposefully put people around us who can be a voice of affirmation. We need people we can trust to give us honest and caring feedback. Find someone who can see a broad view of not just your work and its place in your field, but of who you are.

And be that voice of affirmation for someone else.

Be your own source of affirmation.

Better yet, be that voice of affirmation for yourself.

I tell a colleague that she is doing great. “Am I?” her response. I chide another colleague not to worry about her annual review, which is always fantastic. “You know if you are doing the right thing, and you don’t need anyone else to tell you that.” She sighs, “I wish I could believe you.” The imposter’s curse means that we dismiss praise as luck, timing, or just fooling others.

In 2015, I was walking through my own story of harassment and disregard as an associate professor, when I found a new way to fail or succeed – I became a mother. At the time, I was frustrated by my place as an outsider in my department. I requested to transition to a part-time tenured position, an unprecedented move at my university.

Those years were demanding both at work and at home. But as I shuttled between the stay-at-home-mom world and the tenure-track world, I gained clarity on my core values. I budgeted my time carefully, zeroing in on mentoring, writing, and collaborations. I started to see all the extra activity in academics as a lot of posturing – and I was no longer the one doing the pretending.

Joy and achievement come in the day-to-day when I look for it: writing that sagacious research statement, spinning up a freshly minted simulation, creating a new world out of a syllabus and a semester. A broader view shows me students becoming masters, thinkers, and leaders. I waited for experience to inform me that I’m qualified and knowledgeable when I never should have doubted myself.

Deputize your own internal authority to say, “I’m enough.”

You belong.

The origin story for my own inner imposter begins in 1996, my freshman year of college. I was the only woman in my computer-aided design class of about 30 students. One lab session, I was working at my computer, and the professor reprimanded me in front of the class, “You giggle a lot.”

I didn’t attribute much importance to it at the time, and I don’t recall my feelings after that. But 30 years later, that is one of the few clear memories of my freshman year. The first distinction with more to come.

The truth is, that professor was right. I do laugh a lot. What that professor didn’t know is that I also cry a lot. But these things – laughing, crying, mothering – don’t disqualify me as an engineer or an academic, and my achievements don’t qualify me. It’s the skills, mindset, and passion for infrastructure that guide us through careers in civil engineering academics.



We held the We are WE event for 10 years, with participation from a growing number of women faculty who joined our department. Through sharing women's stories, promoting women, and connecting a network of affirmative voices, we inspired students. A survey of past participants found that women who attended We are WE reported that they overcame a perception that they didn't belong in graduate school.

The antidote to the imposter's syndrome is a belonging phenomenon. I can both be uniquely me and belong here. Let's make sure that the women in our circles know the same thing.



Photo caption: "Emily Berglund. Free Expression Tunnel at North Carolina State University."