Distinguished chemical engineer and BASF executive Heidi Alderman will be the featured speaker at the UH Cullen College of Engineering 2018 commencement on Friday, May 11.

Alderman - who currently serves as senior vice president of chemical intermediates in North America at BASF Corp., the largest chemical producer in the world - didn't attend the Cullen College for her engineering studies, but has been devoted to Houston's University since she moved to the Bayou City in 2011.

"The University of Houston is very important to the city of Houston," she says, noting that the UH campus is the second most diverse in the country. "We care a great deal about diversity and inclusion at BASF, so we align ourselves with like-minded institutions like UH to further our mutual objectives."

Today Alderman heads a $1 billion business of manufacturing and marketing intermediate chemicals created in plants across Texas and Louisiana. She also serves on BASF's executive diversity council, where she actively works to increase the hiring and promotion of women and underrepresented groups at BASF.

As a member of the Cullen College's Engineering Leadership Board for over seven years (including two years in service as chair of the board), Alderman provides invaluable input on the college's curricula and programs from
the perspective of a seasoned industry leader. Along the way she has mentored and advised countless engineering students, sponsored the Program for Mastery in Engineering Studies (PROMES), spoken at events and workshops, and connected UH Cullen College students and alumni with internship, co-op and full-time positions at BASF.

Breaking new ground

After earning her bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, NJ, Alderman began her career in 1981 as a process engineer at Rohm and Haas in Philadelphia, PA.

At the time, there weren't many women working in the chemical industry. But Alderman managed to thrive. She says her parents - especially her mother - were her mentors and motivators.

"I saw from an early age an example of a working mother," Alderman recalls. "My mother used to always say to us, 'Your education - what you have inside of your head - that's something no one can take away from you.'"

Alderman's parents emigrated to the U.S. in the wake of WWII, carving a new life for themselves with little more than the broken pieces of their former existence in Germany. They had lost all of their possessions, been separated from their family members and had very little money.

Somehow, against the odds, Alderman's parents flourished in their new homeland. They started a business importing surgical instruments from Germany, eventually selling the company when they retired.

Alderman followed in her parents' groundbreaking footsteps. She earned her master's degree from Drexel University in chemical engineering and landed a new role at Air Products and Chemicals in 1995. She climbed the ranks, becoming a procurement manager and a business manager before taking a position at BASF in 2003 as business director. In less than two years she was promoted to vice president.

"It was a major turning point in my career," she says. "I went from being an individual contributor to a manager of managers, which requires a different set of skills."

With more than 150 people working under her, Alderman says she had to learn how to create an environment in which employees are united by a singular vision and feel that they are part of something bigger, something great. "If you treat others as you wish to be treated, no matter how high you go in an organization, that's what allows people to succeed," she says.

Alderman was promoted to senior vice president of procurement in 2008 followed by senior vice president of petrochemicals in 2011 before taking on her current role as senior vice president of intermediates in 2016.

Fostering the next generation

With more than 30 years of professional success under her belt, Alderman helps foster the success of students and new engineers - especially women and minorities - as they break into their professional careers. In 2017 she served as the nationwide chair of the National Association of Manufacturer's Step Ahead program and is a member of the national Women Corporate Director's Organization.

In her contact with engineering students and young professionals, she often stresses the importance of sticking it out at a new job rather than jumping ship at the first opportunity.

"Every job you have, make it uniquely your own," she advises. "Don't be in a hurry to jump from one job to another. Learn the job, make it better than the person who had the role before you, and find a way to make an impact there however you can."
In encouraging women engineers to climb the professional ladder, Alderman likes to remind them that they don't lag behind their male counterparts in competence, but they often fall short in confidence.

Her advice? Don't be afraid to speak your mind.

"Speak up! Research has shown that often times confidence, not competence, is what gets you the job. So, I encourage women to know their worth, grow their confidence and speak up about they want."

The spring 2018 UH Cullen College of Engineering commencement will be held at NRG Arena on May 11 at 2 p.m. For more information, please visit www.egr.uh.edu/current-students/commencement

© University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering