

*“If things don’t work out back home, I might need to drop out.”*

This thought, unfortunately, was not a one-time occurrence. My initial decision to attend college left me with a great deal of internal conflict and guilt. I dreamt of attending Rice University for years, I felt confident in my passion for science, and I was thrilled to finally have the opportunity to begin researching. However, I was also terrified at the thought of leaving my family behind. Since junior year of high school, I worked as the sole caretaker for my younger brother, who had just entered the sixth grade. We had neither parents nor relatives capable of helping. Receiving my college acceptance letter only complicated the situation, as moving away to a college campus meant finding a new home and caretaker.

The transition was difficult for both of us. I spent my freshman year balancing time between class, checking in on things at home, and working to financially support both myself and my brother. As a first generation, low-income college student, it was overwhelming. I was unable to fully dedicate myself towards being a student nor a sibling. I felt incredibly out of place amongst my peers and doubted my ability to succeed against the odds.

*“When am I going to find time to join a lab? What’s going to happen when classes get harder? I’m not sure I can do this alone.”*

In the end, I couldn’t. Instead, I was incredibly fortunate to have gained the support of friends and their families. They provided stable housing, financial, and emotional support for my brother, easing my worries and allowing me to focus on my studies. In the process, I learned how to navigate and utilize the many support systems available at my institution. By the end of the semester, I gained confidence in my ability to balance my personal and academic commitments, allowing me to reach out to potential labs on campus. Despite having no prior research experience, my PI welcomed me into her lab, guided me through my first semester of wet-lab work, and provided an opportunity for independent research. The support I received was valuable encouragement for me to continue as both a student and scientist, prompting me to recognize and value the impact of mentorship.

As a result, I applied to become a Student Ambassador for first generation, low-income students. As an ambassador, one of my responsibilities was to host lunches where we could gather and socialize. From conversations at these lunches, I learned that my initial hesitancy to pursue research opportunities was not an isolated incident. Many felt similarly unprepared, hindered by extenuating circumstances, or were unsure of where to begin.

Hoping to leverage my personal experience with adjusting to college and navigating research, I hosted student-led research and career panels and formed partnerships with university offices to spread awareness of resources available on-campus. These events advertised dedicated services for academic and career advising, faculty within each department capable of referring students to prospective labs, and fellowships within the university that provided financial compensation for first-time researchers.

After this, I began to recognize the impact I could make as a peer who understood first-hand the unique circumstances first generation, low-income students often face. Thus, I sought to extend my efforts across multiple leadership positions. During my time as an Orientation Week Leader, I developed and administered training campus-wide to student volunteers on social and academic advising for all matriculating undergraduates, with a particular emphasis on first-generation students. As a Peer Academic Advisor, I held yearly "Introduction to Research" events for freshmen students on how to look for and contact prospective laboratories. Across each of these positions and events, I aimed to demonstrate the accessibility of lab work to students of all research backgrounds, sharing my personal experience with adjusting to campus and finding a lab to do so. In the process, I discussed strategies for balancing research positions with other personal, financial, and academic commitments. Many of my peers, for instance, were not aware that most laboratory positions could offer compensation at a rate comparable to a part-time job, providing money they may need to support their own families - or that research could be taken for course credit to meet the full-time student requirement, which is necessary for financial aid eligibility. Overall, by sharing my personal experiences and knowledge of available resources, I hoped to encourage any aspiring or curious researchers to pursue their scientific interests, discovering my own passion for mentorship in the process.

As a graduate student, I intend to continue advocating for students from unconventional and underserved backgrounds. Whether through bench mentorship or continuing to volunteer in outreach programs such as Berkeley Connect, I aim to actively increase the accessibility of research and scientific careers by providing opportunity, education, and encouragement. I believe these efforts are an important component in addressing the ongoing struggle for accessibility and inclusion in science, of which includes first generation, low-income students - a group that ultimately encompasses multiple underserved demographics. I intend for these efforts to continue well into the classroom, where I hope to serve as a professor who directly supports underserved student populations through active mentorship and a first-hand understanding of the unique experiences we are frequently faced with.