

Diversity is more than skin-deep: it is socioeconomic, cultural, and experiential. In my life I have overcome barriers to higher education as a former foster youth, the son of a Thai-Chinese immigrant and single parent, and an individual from a low-income background. In the past three years as a teacher, I have taught and mentored students from underrepresented backgrounds while learning about their unique challenges. Having surmounted difficulties of my own, I empathize with those facing obstacles to their dreams, and take joy in helping them tackle the barriers that hold them back from social mobility.

My successes in life belie the challenges I have overcome. Not many would guess that I turned eight in foster care, that I am one of the 3% of former foster youth holding a college degree, or that my mother, an immigrant and single-parent, worked two jobs to support my sister and me when we were young. My hometown of Perris, California, a predominately Spanish-speaking community in Riverside County, was staggeringly underrepresented at UC Berkeley, where undaunted in a new setting, I finished with good grades, solid research experiences, and delivered the commencement address to my graduating class of Integrative Biology.

By being immersed in Latino culture as a youth, I became motivated to learn Spanish in school. As a teacher, speaking Spanish has been an invaluable asset, connecting me to students and parents who exclusively speak the second largest language used in California. Also as a teacher I have had the privilege to mentor high school students on the cusp of college, many of whom come from underrepresented backgrounds: women interested in science, racial minorities, and first generation college students. It is a true honor to empower, encourage, and advise these inspiring students.

Within academia and specifically in the natural sciences, I believe it is important to recognize the diversity of faculty and create pathways for groups that remain underrepresented, such as women and minorities. A recent field experiment that gained national attention showed that faculty ignored requests to speak about research from women and minorities at a higher rate than requests from Caucasian males, indicating a selection bias before students even applied to graduate school (Milkman, Akinola and Chugh, 2012). I am hopeful that through my efforts as a future professor from a diverse background, I can help disassemble these biases, and promote access to higher education for people from all backgrounds.

My experiences are but one in the vast mural of diversity; difference comes in countless varieties. My particular experiences have broadened my views of people and increased my ability to empathize and connect with all members of our society, and will make me a better scientist and teacher. As a student interested in water sustainability and water quality, I recognize that my field will inform policy that will affect millions of people. Natural resource issues affect people disproportionately. For example, some of the hardest-hit communities in California affected by groundwater nitrate contamination will lack the resources to tackle water quality issues in their region (Harter & Lund et al., 2012). I come from one of those communities. In my career as a scientist and teacher, I hope to bring a perspective informed by an appreciation for diversity, and a commitment to serving the underserved.