I grew up in a low-income single-parent household in rural Georgia. Unlike many of my peers in PhD programs, my parents did not go to graduate school. They did not graduate college at all—in fact they barely graduated high school. My father, who passed away when I was eleven, worked as a foreman on construction sites around Atlanta. My mother was an aspiring artist turned homemaker. While they were very helpful with creative endeavors,[1] they had never been academically motivated themselves. Thus by the time I was in third or fourth-grade they were no longer able to help me with my school work. This turned me into a fiercely independent and fairly successful student; however, for many years I believed that I alone was one hundred percent responsible for my scholastic successes and failures. During middle school, high school and my undergraduate education I didn't know how to ask adults or teachers for help. I never attended office hours, emailed teachers to ask questions, or asked for extensions when personal issues made completing assignments on time difficult.

This might seem absurd to successful PhD-level economists but this is a struggle that first-generation students go through frequently. It's a major setback that often causes us to under-preform in school and leaves us more vulnerable in academic settings. During the start of my graduate studies I was still very hesitant about asking for help and feedback on my work. I went to office hours before and after exams but was often too intimidated to ask questions, most of the time I just felt like I was being a burden to my professors.

Unfortunately for me, one of my peers picked up on my insecurities and exploited them. This individual made sure I never had one-on-one time with professors and if I said a professor was doing exciting cutting-edge work, I would find them in the professors office the next day—chatting about the material I was interested in. I once told this person what my career goals where—suddenly those were their goals as well. Putting it in writing, their manipulation seems obvious but when this happened, I cheered this person on. I thought they were my friend and that their success was just due to asking for help—a skill that felt unobtainable to me.

Eventually I realized what they were doing, when they prevented me from talking to the only seminar speaker Oregon hosted during my PhD that was a woman in my field. When this happened I felt isolated and devastated, I also came to the realization that the biggest thing holding me back was my irrational fear of asking for help. So, I started forcing myself out of my comfort zone by emailing professors more and going to office hours. One of my biggest regrets is waiting until the second-year of my PhD to do so. Shortly after I learned how to ask for help I started teaching undergraduates myself. Since I understand what it's like to felt out of place in academia, I have always been very clear that I am open to chat with students and that they are always welcome in my office hours. I have also always tried to be visible as a first-generation student by putting a placard on my office door and mentioning my status as a first-generation student.

[1] My love of mathematics comes, in part, from my father's background in construction. I spent a lot of time as a child helping him with carpentry projects and he often made me calculate where and how he should cut wood for the projects.

At the University of Oregon I have taught intermediate macroeconomics and introductory macroeconomics. Before teaching intermediate macro I had graded for it several times and noticed that the top achievers in the class were always white men. Consistently, the high-scores in the classes I teach come from students with diverse backgrounds and genders. For instance when I taught intermediate in Summer 2018, Fall 2019, and Spring 2020 my highest scoring student was a woman each time, with an even mixture of male and female students obtaining the ten highest scores (this has also been true for my intro class as well). I do try to make my class a welcoming environment to all students, by not letting individual students dominate discussions and by tying in real research created by economists of all backgrounds.

My favorite parts of teaching are helping students learn one-on-one and mentoring them to some degree. So, I always try to email my high-achieving students to encourage them to study more economics and to let them know they can reach out to me in the future. Many of these students have done so, in order to find out more about becoming an economics major or for help applying (successfully!) to graduate school.

I am committed to making economics a welcoming discipline to all people. I actively contribute to diversity among my peers by reaching out to support and elevate first-generation graduate students and individuals from under-represented groups, including myself as a woman and a first-generation student. I frequently help other students gain confidence to email or approach professors about research, both in my department and through the mentorship program I took part in via the promising scholars professional development group. Also, I am now one of the most outspoken graduate students in my department and I use this to help promote people who are too shy to nominate themselves to elected graduate student positions and encourage women and people in under-represented groups to be vocal and visible within my current department.

Since I have struggled with feeling like I belong and feeling able to ask for help, I always try to reach out and aid others so they don't have to ask. I try my best to meet the more junior graduate students and learn how I can help them.