

Throughout my PhD I have focused on making astronomy open and accessible to all. As a 51 Pegasi b Fellow I will continue this work to ensure students from all backgrounds feel empowered to pursue STEM research as a possible career path by fostering an inclusive environment and communicating opportunities and pathways to become involved in STEM.

One of the ways I have sought to expand inclusion in science is by seeking out opportunities to talk with junior scientists at the undergraduate and high school level. I spoke to an introductory astronomy summer course for high school students at the University of Chicago. In this role, I took care to make the science not only informative, but also exciting and accessible to a new generation of students, many of which come from underrepresented backgrounds. I have also sat on many graduate student panels to discuss and “demystify” the graduate admissions process for undergraduate students. This includes multiple instances of speaking to undergraduates at the Sewanee University of the South. As students at a small liberal arts college, many of the students at Sewanee do not have much experience or knowledge about options for STEM education beyond their undergraduate degree. I believe that reaching out to communities such as this to actively encourage them to continue in academic research is absolutely necessary to enhance the diversity of researchers in our field.

In addition to these more formal programs I have been a part of, I also pride myself in seeking opportunities to be a welcoming presence for other graduate students. I am very open about my own non-traditional path to graduate school, including not receiving any acceptances to graduate programs on my first application cycle, to remove stigma from perceived failures. I have also acted as an informal advisor to younger students in my research group, helping both undergraduates and junior graduate students to feel comfortable in the department.

In the hope of making graduate school a safer environment for all students, I acted as the Departmental Steward for the Graduate Student Union. In a recent survey of graduate students by Nature, a majority of respondents highlighted financial worries and overall cost of living as top concerns¹. If we are serious about making scientific research a viable research path for all students, then we must ensure that graduate students are fairly compensated and people from all economic backgrounds are able to attend graduate school as a career. As a Union Steward, I not only helped students in my own department and across the university in fighting for yearly cost of living salary adjustments, but made the University of Chicago a more equitable and inclusive environment for future graduate students.

In my postdoctoral career, I will continue this work of making academia more welcoming, equitable, and inclusive for all students from a wide diversity of backgrounds. This will include continuing outreach programs to students at all different levels, for example, working with local universities, colleges, and high schools to work with students in class and as part of summer programs. As a graduate student during Covid lockdowns and the rise of remote learning, I have seen first hand how different teaching styles are necessary to reach a variety of students, and the importance of flexibility and accessibility in teaching styles. In the long term, I will use these programs in addition to experience TAing to create a welcoming learning environment as a future professor.

¹Woolston, C. 2022, Nature, 610, 805, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03394-0>