

Andrea Porras-Alfaro knows what it's like to be a first-generation college student. And working at Western Illinois University, she comes across many international students who are simply looking for someone who understands them.

And so, when a young woman from Africa was struggling, Porras-Alfaro's instinct kicked in. "I supported her," she says, "and listened to everything, not just the science." The student was having a difficult time keeping up with the academic expectations of her program, but was also home sick, dealing with family issues, and fighting depression. Porras-Alfaro helped the young woman through her academic troubles and encouraged her to get in contact with the counseling services offered on campus, something she is not afraid to do with any of her students who need extra help.

Six years after the student graduated, Porras-Alfaro received a letter in the mail. "I am married," it read. "I have children. You made a difference in my life. Thank you for being there for me when I needed you."

This letter had a strong impression on Porras-Alfaro. "Sometimes you don't even realize that you're doing something that impacted anyone," she says, adding that it's not just the academic achievements that mentors should brag about. "She has a business and a family, and she's so proud of where she is, because she pulled through. It's more than having a PhD and a doctorate. It's so much more than that."

Porras-Alfaro is very humble about her mentoring skills. "Most of the time it's just listening," she admits. "From my perspective, I don't do much. I just take a little time to get to know them." And she's learned a lot about her students by doing just that. Porras-Alfaro has many first-generation college students, and they often lack self-confidence and preparation.

"Students don't always know what to expect," says Porras-Alfaro, adding that many students come from rural areas or farming towns, and some don't even have the support of their families. With students in these situations, it's important to be approachable. "Learning how to be a college student is hard," she says, adding that it is especially difficult when working multiple jobs just to pay for school. "Being able to talk to a faculty member without being scared helps a lot."

Porras-Alfaro tries her best to help those who are struggling, either by lending them books, helping them get campus-based jobs, or inviting them to record her lectures and review their notes during her office hours. But sometimes that's not enough – and that's where the lab comes in. "When I find students who are struggling," Porras-Alfaro says, "I reach out to my lab students to reach out and help them fit in."

This camaraderie, along with the peer-mentoring system that Porras-Alfaro uses in her lab, creates an environment where students can learn with and through one another. "It helps the environment when they work by themselves or with other

students, and they don't feel as intimidated by coming to me," she says. "It gives them ownership."

Porras-Alfaro insists on making herself available to her students. "I am here to facilitate," she says. "I open doors as much as you want me to." In fact, she encourages her students to feel comfortable in approaching her. "I'm not God," she laughs. "I have my old notebooks where experiments failed, and I pull them out." Using her past failures as examples, Porras-Alfaro helps alleviate her students' feelings of isolation.

As much as she loves mentoring in higher education, Porras-Alfaro is confident that even earlier stages of academic support are essential, along with programs such as Research Inspiring Student Excellence (RISE). "I think research makes a difference," she says confidently. "When you see students learning from other students in the lab, they just get a support group."

But in the end, it's all about giving them wings. "I love to promote my students' work," says Porras-Alfaro with pride. "Because when you give ownership to your students, they fly."