

Diversity Statement

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Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are values that are immensely important to me, and I know that promoting initiatives that support these values can help students from underrepresented backgrounds succeed. I am a first-generation college student, and a veteran of the United States Marine Corps. I am also a second-generation Mexican American from a working-class family who grew up speaking Spanish at home and English in the classroom.

As a child I dreamed of being an architect. I loved to draw and was inspired by the idea that I could design the very buildings that made up my school, my neighborhood, and my town. However, I did not believe I had funding for college, nor the aptitude to be admitted let alone successful. In retrospect this was not the case. Although I had positive role models, I did not have the guidance or mentorship to show me that college was accessible. Instead, I felt called to serve my country in the United States Marine Corps. I trained as a Persian Farsi Linguist at the Defense Language Institute. My training was a 52-week intensive course where I learned to read, write, and listen in my designated language at near native proficiency. Because the training was academically challenging, I acquired the study skills and desire to learn which prepared me for my future studies. Additionally, my service in the Military provided me with financial support for college through the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

In 2016 I received a Bachelor's of Arts in Economics and Math and a minor in Philosophy from the University of Arizona (U of A), which is a designated Hispanic Serving Institution. While at U of A I was fortunate to find support, mentorship and community that encouraged me in my studies and guided me in steps necessary to pursue a graduate program at the University of Minnesota. My mentors also encouraged me to participate in programs like the 2015 Harvard Pipelines into Biostatistics and Computational Biology Summer program, and the Math Alliance, both of which are designed to increase diversity in STEM fields.

During my time at the University of Minnesota I was awarded the Diversity of Views and Experiences fellowship, which promotes the recruitment and support of academically excellent students with diverse ethnic, racial, economic, and educational backgrounds. I also worked as a research analyst at the Opportunity and Inclusive Growth Institute (OIGI), a division of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. As a research analyst at the OIGI, I have assisted in studies concerning racial and ethnic gaps in financial service use, earnings and employment of the formerly incarcerated, and the economic hardship of single mothers.¹

My research is focused on reducing inequality in economic outcomes, including higher education. In September 2020 I coauthored a paper with Luisa Blanco, Marco Angrisani, and Salvador Contreras that relates gaps in financial literacy to differences in education, family history, neighborhoods, and access to financial services. My dissertation explores how underrepresented students' personal beliefs about their abilities impact college completion rates. Additionally, I have a working paper that demonstrates how living with parents is associated with the educational achievement and earnings of single mothers.

I actively participate in organizations designed to increase diversity in graduate studies, such as the American Economic Association's (AEA)'s mentorship program. In June 2021 I presented my research and served as a discussion leader for the AEA Summer Mentoring Pipeline Conference. I will present my Job Market Paper in sessions of the upcoming 2021 Southern Economic Association and the 2022 Allied Social Sciences Association meetings, both of which are hosted by AEA's mentorship program. I have also participated in College of Diversity events at the University of Minnesota, aimed at building community for underrepresented students in graduate school.

¹ For an interview about my experience at the OIGI see www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2021/scholar-spotlight-sergio-barrera

In my volunteer work I serve as a bilingual tutor and youth mentor for St. John Paul II Catholic School and Ascension Catholic School, which primarily serve Hispanic and African American K-8 students. During the 2020-2021 school year, I volunteered as a Spanish translator for parent teacher conferences at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, which serves a large immigrant population.

In my teaching I work to include all students in the discussion and to incorporate their areas of interest into the subject material. I cover topics such as income inequality, criminal justice reform, access to higher education, and immigration. My aim is to teach them how to use economics to discover answers to the questions they are interested in. I also believe it is important to use different methods to accommodate different learning styles, including case studies, anecdotes, visual aids, in class activities, and group work.

I believe diversity is valuable and it strengthens not only our institutions, profession, and research, but also our communities. It is important to promote more equity and inclusion because there are many barriers that prevent members from underrepresented groups achieve equal access and feel welcome in our spaces. I have been fortunate to have been given support and community through diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and because of that I have been able to succeed in college like I once hoped to when I dreamed of being an architect. That is why I will work hard to provide the same opportunities to succeed and feel welcome for students from underrepresented backgrounds.