My approach to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) starts with being forthcoming about my own story. As the grandson of four immigrants—the byproduct of migrant farmworkers in California’s Monterey and Kings counties, and low-income service workers in Los Angeles—mine is not the typical background encountered in the academy. Sharing this information with students breaks stereotypes regarding who scientists are and begins to create a learning environment where people of all backgrounds belong, which I believe is at the foundation of EDI missions within the academy. When combined with my experiences traveling across the country in pursuit of academic training, I believe my background enhances my capacity to train students to become 21st-century scholars and innovators at the University of California, Los Angeles.

My academic journey has landed me in a variety of communities across the country, exposing me to regional cultural differences. My undergraduate institution, XXX, has been designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) by the Department of Education. Thus, my early educational experience is both unique by the nation’s standards and aspirational to the UCLA community, as indicated by Chancellor Block’s goal to reach HSI status by 2025. I started my doctorate at a large, Midwestern school that lacked ethnic diversity and finished it at a Southern campus hosting an international community of academics. Each experience has helped to define my own identity, while exposing me to a wealth of diversity. I have grown comfortable facilitating conversations where it becomes necessary to manage varying points of view, experiences, and beliefs about the world. In my experience, I have been successful at creating an inclusive learning environment by addressing issues directly as they arise and directing focus on the course materials that spark such discussions. For instance, I once found myself in a situation where my criticisms of a proposed research methods project were interpreted as criticism of a student’s politics. I was able to acknowledge her perspective and validate her phenomenon of interest, subsequently explaining that my critique was aimed at the proposed protocol. The project was successfully completed, having been much improved prior to data collection.

To enhance my ability to provide an inclusive learning environment, I have sought outside training in the form of a course from The Inclusive STEM Teaching Project. In addition to learning various strategies for using more inclusive language, I have a better appreciation for instructional methodologies that benefit all types of learners. I have also adopted the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines as an origin point for designing my courses. Furthermore, I am motivated to advance first-generation college students and persons of color by drawing them into the laboratory and immersing them in an advanced research setting. I place a premium on the service I provide my student-advisees and understand the importance of both maintaining an open mind to their unique circumstances and conveying that openness in my interactions with the broader campus community. During my tenure as a graduate student, I advised several underrepresented minority (URM) students, many of whom applied to graduate school. For some of these students, I have helped them comprehend what to expect from graduate-level training, while others have needed guidance narrowing their interests to better target prospective schools and laboratories ahead of their applications. I am committed to continuing mentoring undergraduate students such as these, but I am also excited to recruit and train URM students at the graduate level and help the academy to diversify the talent pipeline.

As a Latinx individual, I have experienced first-hand the importance of representation in academe. Thanks to the efforts of many others, I have benefitted from programs intended to broaden horizons and ease the financial burden for URM students. At XXX, I was a Initiative for Inclusive Excellence fellow, while at XXX I was a fellow. As a post-doc I have been funded by the President’s Postdoctoral Fellowship Program in Maryland. Each of these programs provided me with a stipend that at times made my education affordable and, thus, possible. The stipend and travel funding aside, these programs made available diverse mentorship outside of my department and my immediate advisers. Throughout my academic journey, I have been able to serve on various panels to share whatever wisdom I posses with the next generation of under-represented scientists. Moreover, I have had numerous opportunities to mentor men and women of various backgrounds in scientific endeavors and applications to graduate school. These types of programs embody the type of service I am excited to provide in my capacity as an assistant professor at UCLA. I understand how the hard work of a past generation has made space for me in STEM, and I am passionate about continuing to pay that forward.