

Describe an experience that demonstrates your resilience, perseverance, and/or leadership skills in response to a challenge in any area of your life.

As a first-generation, low-income, queer and transgender student of color, navigating and surviving college has been a very difficult experience. All of my identities inform one another, but I would say that most of the hurdles that have tripped me throughout my undergraduate career were the result of being a first-generation college student. Both of my parents were forced to drop out of school in third grade in order to financially support their families. They immigrated to the United States from a poor farming community in central Mexico in order to escape the monotonous cycle of poverty and increase the chances of my siblings and I getting access to the education they were denied. While I am very grateful that my parents made so many sacrifices for my benefit, I have always felt that being the first in my family to pursue higher education has positioned me at a disadvantage compared to many of my peers because there has never been anyone to turn to for guidance in academic or career-related matters. While being first-gen has certainly made me a more independent, inquisitive, and resilient person, the lack of resources has also led to debilitating feelings of isolation and incompetence. Attending an elite, primarily white institution like Vassar College has exacerbated those feelings because I often find myself comparing myself to my peers, many of whom have doctor, lawyer, or engineer parents and somehow always seem to know exactly what they are doing. Many of my peers were able to breeze through college, taking for granted their socioeconomic safety nets while benefiting from having parents who could advocate on their behalf when things didn't go their way. Meanwhile, I feel like I have been fumbling my way through college, and life in general, without a map or a safety net, learning mainly through trial and error. Every academic experience I have had has been a solitary expedition into uncharted territory, often causing me to feel like I didn't belong in any of the academic spaces I inhabited. This feeling manifested itself in the form of imposter syndrome, which ingrained within me an erroneous belief that I didn't "deserve" to be at my elite school and that someone like me could never be a "real" scientist.

In the past, these feelings have kept me from reaching out to my professors for help even when I desperately needed it and from taking advantage of the resources offered by my college simply because I did not believe that I had the right to do so. I viewed myself merely as a guest at my college, and felt lucky that my school would let someone like me step foot on its pristine campus. It has been extremely challenging for me to overcome those burdensome feelings of self-doubt, but thankfully, I have been able to reverse my beliefs through first-generation low-income therapy groups and the help of people in my support system who never fail to remind me that Vassar College is not a gift to me, instead, I am a gift to Vassar College. Most importantly, working in neuroscience labs has played a key role in elevating my confidence in myself. Working as a researcher has helped me to trust my intuition and has helped me realize that I have many unique skills and insights to offer to the field of neuroscience. I now wholeheartedly believe that neuroscience is a viable career option for someone from my background. I finally feel like I have a space in academia, and I remain hopeful that in the future I will be able to play a role in carving out spaces in STEM for more scientists of color from first-generation low-income backgrounds.