

# Bridge Scholars: Improving Inclusive Excellence Through Mentorship

By Karina Morales, Chair of the ACS/SACNAS Working Group, University of Wisconsin–Madison

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*Members of the ACS/SACNAS Working Group along with Bridge Scholars and their mentors. From l to r: Liz Gillispie (Washington State University), Tabare Abadie (Corteva Agriscience), Luke Gatiboni (North Carolina State University), Kimberly Araya (University of*

*Puerto Rico), Ole Wendroth (University of Kentucky), Yulissa Perez Rojas (University of California-Merced), Mauricio Soriano (California State University–Fresno), Felipe Aburto (Texas A&M University), Karina Morales (University of Wisconsin–Madison), a*

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“We envision a scientific community where every person, regardless of their background and challenges, is able to explore their potential.” This is how the first paragraph begins of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Statement released by the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA (ACS) Boards of Directors in 2021 ([soils.org/files/DEI/acs%20dei%20statement%202021.pdf](https://soils.org/files/DEI/acs%20dei%20statement%202021.pdf)) outlining the vision of how our Societies can strive forward in the DEI space. Alongside the release of this Statement, the Bridge Scholars Program was also started.

The Bridge Scholars Program has functioned as a partnership between our Societies and the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) through providing approximately 20 scholarships for SACNAS members to attend our International Annual Meeting, receive mentorship, and participate in the graduate student leadership conference. Beyond providing scholarships, this program also pays for members of our Societies to participate in the SACNAS national meeting to demonstrate the broad range of careers in agriculture. Through this approach, our program has shown students the feasibility of pursuing careers in agriculture while giving them the opportunity to connect with Society leaders and experts in their field.

## **Building Deeper Connections**

The 2023 cohort of Bridge Scholars included Mauricio Soriano, a master's student from California State University–Fresno, and his mentor Felipe Aburto, assistant professor at Texas A&M University. Felipe recounted his first time attending a national meeting as a first-generation student: “[I could] remember how afraid I was—that massive feeling of not belonging and not knowing anyone in this strange new space. At that time, I did not get any recommendations from anyone, so I navigated the conference as well as possible with my limited knowledge.” However, as Mauricio described his participation in the program, he indicated that “having programs like this that allow you to communicate with a mentor that has dealt with that same issue can be a influential moment. I think that having representation in an area of study you would like to pursue can make the idea more realistic to obtain.”

Through mentorship, our students have had the opportunity to build deeper connections within the Societies. Many of them have chosen to come back for further career development after their year of sponsorship, including a few who have gone on to serve on committees to continue improving inclusivity within ASA, CSSA, and SSSA.

### **Applications Due End of April**

Over the last three years, Bridge Scholars has had a significant impact on the career trajectory of dozens of students through the advice of mentors and availability of professionals to serve our students. If you are interested in serving as a mentor for Bridge Scholars, please email me, Dr. Karina Morales, at [kmorales3@wisc.edu](mailto:kmorales3@wisc.edu). We would also like to welcome students to apply for this year's Bridge Scholar's Program with applications due at the end of April. Applications can be found at [agronomy.org/awards/view/225/](https://agronomy.org/awards/view/225/).

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