

# Identifying, understanding, & supporting diverse first-generation scholars in linguistics

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## 1 Introduction

These case studies are a supplement to our proceedings paper on the mentorship of first-generation scholars in the field of linguistics. Names used in these case studies come from the Diverse Names Generator. Unless stated otherwise, assume that all students are first-generation.

## 2 First-generation undergraduate students

- (1) Saskia (*she* pronouns) took Introduction to Linguistics with you and did a fantastic job. She continued to excel in Syntax and Sociolinguistics. You ask her if she plans on majoring or minoring in linguistics, and she says, “No, I am premed. Linguistics is fun, but it’s important for me to do something that will help me be more financially secure. I don’t think that I could afford to take out loans for graduate school in linguistics. It also seems kind of selfish to study something just for me, when there are so many real problems in the world, such as healthcare accessibility and climate catastrophe.” How do you respond to these statements?
- (2) Sanghan (*he* pronouns) is taking Syntax with you in the spring semester. Despite working part-time and commuting from home, he has been keeping up with his assignments and doing well. You have been working with him on his term paper, and you think that it is good enough to expand into either a conference presentation or senior thesis. Sanghan is pleased to hear this, and asks if he could do a research assistantship with you this summer to pursue this. You would be delighted to accept, but given that you are a non-tenure-line professor (or a tenure-line professor at a teaching institution), you have no money to pay him. You know that he will need to work through the summer to support himself. What advice do you have for Sanghan?
- (3) Lujain (*they* pronouns) was one of your best students this semester in Introduction to Linguistics. They did their final project on variation in the acceptability of gender-neutral pronouns in Portuguese. You tell them that you hope to see them in future courses, but they tell you that they only enjoyed a few topics in the introductory course. “I really enjoyed sociolinguistics, language and racialization, and language ideologies, but I thought syntax and phonology were kind of a pain.” You know that if Lujain decides to major in linguistics that they will have to take many more formal classes, and that there are very few options that will be appropriate for their interests and talents at this particular institution. What advice do you have for Lujain?
- (4) Thara (*she* pronouns) wishes to apply to doctoral programs in linguistics. Although she performed well in the major and has a high GPA, she does not have a suitable writing sample, as her institution does not offer the option of an honors thesis in linguistics. Thara attends a large flagship public university, where linguistics classes tend to have final examinations and not papers. Thara has no idea what would be appropriate to use as a writing sample, and she is concerned that not having a thesis will be a red flag. What advice would you give Thara, and how would you structure your recommendation letter so that she has the best chance of being accepted into a program?
- (5) Quiztoc (*he* pronouns) attends a small liberal arts college where there is no linguistics major. He has taken a number of courses in anthropology, neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and modern languages. Quiztoc has reached out to you to ask about ways for him to gain additional exposure to linguistics, be this formally in terms of coursework and research, or informally in terms of books and media. Keeping in mind that Quiztoc is a lower-income student, how would you encourage him to pursue his interests?

- (6) Yashira (*they* pronouns) is currently enrolled in Syntax. Much of the class involves the discussion and analysis of acceptability judgments made by course participants. Yashira has an immigrant background, and although English is not their first language, it is their best language. Sometimes Yashira gets the feeling that other students do not see them as a “real native speaker,” and ignore their judgments when they contrast with the “expected” ones. If you were the instructor, how would you handle this? If you were not the instructor, and Yashira has confided in you about this problem, what advice would you have for them?
- (7) Lakeya (*she* pronouns) is a Black first-generation linguistics major at a flagship public university. Although she has done very well in her coursework, she confides in you that she feels somewhat socially isolated from the rest of the department. “All of the other majors get together and do homework and hang out in their free time, but I just do everything by myself.” Lakeya has a rich social life thanks to her campus job and her leadership role in the Black Student Union. The modal linguistics major at her university, however, is a white upper-middle-class continuing-generation student. She is interested in graduate school, but is concerned that her feelings of exclusion will continue. What advice do you have for her?
- (8) Tommy (*he* pronouns) is a member of the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. Although he has no research experience in linguistics, he has been active in his tribe’s language revitalization efforts, and he wishes to pursue graduate study in order to continue contributing to these efforts. He has been told by one faculty member in your department that it will be difficult for him to enter and complete a doctoral program if he does not have theoretical interests in the structure of Tlingit. “Just being interested in language documentation would not be enough.” Do you agree with this faculty member? What advice do you have for Tommy?
- (9) You are teaching an introductory course in linguistics at a public institution. You notice that one of the students (*she* pronouns) is doing very well in your course, and you take her aside to ask her to consider being a research assistant for you or at least to take more seriously a career in linguistics. She is a low-income, first-generation student from a racially minoritized background. She has never considered her next steps and is a little surprised about your request and shuts it down immediately. Six months later, she comes back to your office and asks if your offer still stands. What advice do you have for her?

### 3 First-generation graduate students

- (10) Harout (*he* pronouns) is a second-year doctoral student in a linguistics program. He is writing his qualifying paper on syntactic microvariation in Eastern and Western Armenian. He has spread himself a little thin this semester: not only is he a teaching assistant for Introduction to Syntax, he is also a research assistant in the Discourse & Pragmatics Lab and a student observer in an ongoing tenure-line faculty search. Harout also has taken a leadership role in campus-wide efforts to unionize the graduate students, and volunteers as an interpreter for an immigrant rights nonprofit. Given his teaching, service, and activist commitments, Harout has let his research slide, and he is worried that he will not be able to produce a defensible draft of his qualifying paper by the deadline. What advice would you have for Harout as a) his qualifying paper reader, b) the Director of Graduate Studies, or c) his mentor?
- (11) Nyla (*they* pronouns) is a first-year doctoral student in a linguistics program. One of their documented access needs is the use of a screen reader. Screen readers vary in how effectively they are able to read phonetic symbols and trees, and Nyla has therefore been struggling in their graduate phonology and syntax courses. The instructors and the Director of Graduate Studies have been responsive to Nyla’s needs, and have given them extra time on assignments and met with them individually in order to read aloud symbols and diagrams that have not been rendered correctly by the screen reader. Although Nyla considers their access needs to be well met in the classroom, they are not often well met by workshop leaders, external speakers, or courses outside of the linguistics department. Although Nyla has every right to demand that their access needs be met, they tell you that they sometimes choose not to self-advocate because they are afraid of being seen as a problem student and costing themselves social and professional opportunities in the long run. What advice do you have for Nyla as a) their advisor or b) the Director of Graduate Studies?

## 4 First-generation faculty

- (12) You are a member of a faculty search committee. One of the candidates, Dr. Childers (*she* pronouns), is a white female first-generation scholar who works in a subfield that is underprioritized in the department. She comes from a rural, working-class background and worked for nonprofits committed to rural youth empowerment for ten years before starting graduate school. She has continued to do activism around the areas of healthcare accessibility and food insecurity in rural environs, but this work is largely orthogonal to her research on the syntax-prosody interface. Your department wishes to make a hire that furthers the department's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Your search committee chair says that first-generation status alone does not make a candidate "diverse," and that her activist work, while commendable, does not help us diversify the linguistics professoriate. What is your response to this?