As a first-generation, non-traditional student returning to college after five years in the workforce, and a woman in STEM, I benefitted greatly from mentors who have opened doors and shown me the way to access the career I want. I am a postdoctoral fellow at the Life Sciences Institute (LSI) in Dr. Melanie Ohi’s lab, working towards the complimentary goals of leading a research group to address questions that inform our understanding of human health and continuing to foster an inclusive STEM community.

I have taken on mentoring, leadership, and service roles in UM and beyond. I was thrilled to provide research experience and networking to a remarkable undergraduate, a fellow woman in STEM, through the LSI’s Perrigo Program last summer. This program provides research experience for undergraduate students in Michigan colleges and universities. We maintained a mentoring relationship after the program ended and I consulted with her on her proposal for the National Sciences Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program. Her success in securing her own funding and her decision to pursue her Ph.D. here at UM were incredibly rewarding. I will prioritize similar investments in the next generation of scientists throughout my career.

While gender equity is still an area for improvement in STEM, there are much starker gaps in racial and ethnic representation. I am proud to have served on the executive board of STEM in Color, an organization founded by Black graduate students to provide training, outreach, and networking opportunities to trainees, centered in the needs and experiences of underrepresented minorities. The organization’s founders’ ties to the Black community and the trust between these leaders and the community allowed members to openly advocate for the events they needed and wanted. As a member of the racial majority, this was an environment in which I could use my skills and resources in service of the needs of people from marginalized groups. For example, I helped to organize and moderate our Bystander Intervention Workshop held in April, 2019. I continue to seek and amplify the voices of colleagues from marginalized groups.

I also recognize the need to introduce science and research opportunities to those who may be considering college in the future. I have lead tours, demonstrations, and conversations with VetCORE, military veterans considering pursuing college as non-traditional students, and the UM Association of Multicultural Scientists Career Day for middle and high school students.

In any research discussions, I relish describing my work on understanding the structure and function of protein complexes. The bacteria *Legionella* has beenin the news with respect to the Flint water crisis, and in regard reopening buildings that had been closed due to the pandemic. When humans inhale water droplets that contain *Legionella*, the bacteria can infect lung cells and cause the potentially fatal pneumonia, Legionnaires’ Disease. Using the protein complex that I study, these bacteria pump out hundreds of molecules that trick the host cell into making an ideal environment for the bacteria to reproduce. This field of research had previously determined what components make up the system, but now how they fit together. This is like trying to put together a machine when you have only a parts list but not a blueprint. By determining how the pieces fit together, we can start to understand how the system works, and that means we can figure out how to us it to prevent or cure infection!

The National Institutes of Health, awarded me a 3-year fellowship to pursue this research. The first resulting manuscript is undergoing minor revisions at *eLife* and was also selected for a platform presentation at the 2020 Microscopy and Microanalysis meeting. Because cryo-EM is a highly collaborative technique, I have contributed to additional projects in the Ohi lab and am a contributing author on two additional recently submitted manuscripts. These projects have given me a great viewpoint into collaboration with researchers in different fields, departments, and universities, which will be important for my faculty career.

Recognizing the importance of collaboration, I joined the LSI Postdoc Committee. This committee facilitates professional development and networking within the LSI. Normally, we provide social events, informal chalk talks, and grant writing workshops. In the current pandemic, we have established new remote events to help trainees remain socially connected. We have also responded to unrest around racism and disruptive immigration policies, serving as a voice for our colleagues to LSI administration. Though this committee has not always been representative of the community in the LSI, we recently welcomed a more diverse group of colleagues to the committee. We have already observed meaningful changes in the focus of our programming as well as the representation of participants.

Beyond UM, I have been selected as one of 36 women and non-binary postdocs who are aspiring future faculty for the professional development and networking organization, the Leading Edge. The Leading Edge Symposium was scheduled to take place this May, but was postponed due to the pandemic. In the meantime, we have redirected our collective power to hold conversations with faculty from various academic institutions about how to enact anti-racism in our own communities and future labs, and to make the institutions’ efforts for recruiting and retaining diverse faculty more transparent.

Finally, I am passionate about advocating for policy changes that create a fair and equitable society in general. In my own community, this means educating family, friends, and neighbors about policies that impact our lives, volunteering for political campaigns that align with my values, and most recently applying to work the polls for upcoming election.

As a postdoc at this large, well respected university, I recognize that I am privileged to work in an incredibly rich environment that isn’t always available to all who might seek it. Though I’m committed to my scientific accomplishments, I’m also acutely aware of my responsibility to build an inclusive STEM environment and increase its accessibility to the greater public. I am continually working to create a career that prioritizes the complementary values of scientific research and community building.