I came from Peru in 2007 to join the PhD program in Sociology. My path towards the PhD was not easy and straightforward. There have been several times in my life when I had to make decisions that changed my life fundamentally, particularly in my professional development. Most of these decisions were influenced by more experienced researchers who offered me information that otherwise I would have not encountered. Moreover, these mentors also offered me the opportunity to meet other researchers and develop a network for my academic development. They provided me with emotional and practical support and I know without their guidance it would have been extremely difficult to me to face the challenges that higher education presented to me. They increased my abilities as a researcher but also my self-confidence by helping me put hands in action on research. That is how I see myself in relation to the students I have worked with. I mentor students because I see that it is part of the commitment of being a scholar is to foster students’ abilities to develop their full potential in democratic horizontal relations of mutual help and support.

In 2009, during my first semester as a discussion leader for social theory for seniors in Sociology, I noticed that some students lacked writing skills and information about how to further their education. I felt these shortcomings constrained their opportunities for professional development. Later in 2010 I started teaching my own classes. The style of the class I designed emphasized personal reflections on gender, class and race and allowed me to address students’ interests and perceptions of their own. This experience helped me learn in practice what I had learned following social theorists who posit that students’ success in higher education is related to their academic effort but also to more subtle pieces of knowledge resulting from their social location.

As a teaching assistant I had the opportunity to meet students one by one and discuss with them their main problems as well as strategies to overcome them. As an instructor, I gained more experience in detecting problems that affected the students’ educational achievement. I realized that there were students with full potential to go to graduate school or to engage in research who lacked information and guidance to develop skills that allowed them to further their education. Mentoring for me meant several things such as giving information to students to open doors for them and working with them towards strengthening key abilities that would help them be successfully further their academic development, once the doors were open. Some students were the first in their families to go to college and lacked information about post graduate education and funding. Therefore, I guided students in learning how to choose a graduate school, apply and look for funding. Other students required information about particulars of career development and the different paths in less publicized careers such as sociology, international
development or women studies. All of them needed personalized guidance on how to strengthen skills that would make them suitable candidates in a competitive academic atmosphere.

In 2009 and 2010 I worked with three undergraduate students identifying professors to sponsor the students’ senior thesis, obtaining information about graduate schools engaging in the application process and searching for funding. We also met regularly to work on their preparation for standardized tests required for their applications. In 2011, thanks to the support of I cubed- funding for interdisciplinary research- I worked with one student to develop her project for a senior thesis. After our project ended, I worked with this student to identify a professor who could sponsor her senior thesis. I also met regularly with her to explain issues related to methods, statistics and writing and we are currently working towards gathering information for her graduate school application. Her senior thesis obtained highest honors. It was a very important achievement for this specific student who years ago enrolled in the military to be able to attend college. My work with graduate students and potential graduate students from different nationalities led to improving research methodologies or revising their initial research ideas to help them organize their research proposals as well as thesis and dissertation prospectus.

The university system has opened the door to less privileged students and as a result it is possible for minority students to have more opportunities. Nevertheless, higher education is often impersonal and standardized thus reflecting mainstream values which are often far from minority students’ expectations and abilities. As a result, minority students face more difficulties to succeed in college. Mentoring, understood as the professional relationship where one more experienced subject assists another –less experienced – in developing specific skills to foster the less experienced colleagues’ abilities so as to insert themselves successfully in the academic world, is key to effectively strengthen students in the academic world. My personal experience with mentors, as well as my experience mentoring students has enriched my life and showed me an alternative way of being a successful scholar based on a humanistic perspective of education.

I am writing this application with great enthusiasm. It is an honor to apply for this mentoring award.

Gina Alvarado