



Faezeh Gholami
2022 Optica Ambassador
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deep-seated desire to give back to others that compelled me to become an Optica Ambassador.

Inspiring confidence (and connection)

As a student, I was shy and hesitant to reach out to people for help, and I wish back then I had a program like the ambassadors—mentors close to my age with diverse experiences—it would have meant a world of difference. Now, as an ambassador myself, I realize simply sharing my story and offering up my experiences enables students and early-career professionals to feel seen and understood.

NEXT GENERATION STORIES

Supporting and mentoring future generations.

The struggles women in the sciences go through are well known, and for immigrants, there's another layer of challenge tied to adapting to a new culture. I was fortunate to have had dedicated mentors to guide me, empowering me with their wisdom and support in navigating the nuances of professional life. Reflecting on my career journey, I recognize that my accelerated advancement to a leadership position at IBM wouldn't have been possible without the invaluable support of those who came before me. It was this recognition and the

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For instance, during COVID, my ambassador cohort set up virtual "office hours" for students and early-career professionals. We set specific times to be available to connect with those from the community around the globe. Many were in the middle of deciding whether to remain in academia or pursue industry, and with ambassadors in both areas,

we were able to offer first-hand perspectives and provide counsel on the benefits and challenges of both. These office hours helped build connections during a very remote time in our lives, and those with whom I spoke gained new insights into the possibilities of careers in industry.

Making an impact

Then, in 2023, I participated as a speaker and mentor at a conference initiated by my fellow ambassador, Jhonattan Cordoba, *Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil.*

Our goal was to provide sessions on optics and photonics, coupled with discussions about career paths. What they lacked in resources, the audience more than made up for in enthusiasm and interest. After the event, some of the students shared that I was the first woman engineer they had ever met and the first person from abroad who had visited them, and I hope that my talk planted a seed of possibility.

I also helped Tatevik Chalyan, *Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium*, another amazing Optica Ambassador,



Faezeh and Jhonattan (center) at the Optica meeting for the Pacific in Quibdo, Colombia.



Faezeh and Tatevik Chalyan with the participants of the student conference in Armenia.

organize a conference in Armenia, neighbor to my home country of Iran. We offered travel grants for students, which enabled participation from geo-politically challenged regions of the world, drawing in those who may not otherwise have been able to attend. I served as a traveling lecturer and spent four days with students who held similar backgrounds and faced similar challenges, offering insights into potential career paths.

To give is to receive

This experience has not been a one-way street. The Optica Foundation

has given me as much, if not more, than I have given. I have had many first-time opportunities with the foundation: the first time on a panel, first time as a speaker, first interview, and so much more. One of my biggest pieces of advice for my mentees is: Volunteer your time. It has been such a privilege to be part of something that contributes so much to this ever-growing community. Through programs like the ambassadors, we are building a stronger, more diverse and global community, one emerging leader at a time.

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Optica Ambassadors provide career advice, technical knowledge and mentorship with students and early-career professionals, supporting professional development. The program is made possible by generous donations to the Optica Foundation Annual Fund. More information can be found at optica.org/Ambassadors.

