# 2025 DEI & Professional Development Scholarship Winners

## SARA AKBARNEJAD NESHELI

**Ph.D. Student – Environmental Engineering**
**State University of New York**

As a young female international Ph.D. candidate in environmental engineering, I bring a unique perspective shaped by academic, professional, and cultural experiences across multiple countries. My background includes a bachelor's and master's degree in water engineering, as well as several years of experience in the water industry prior to beginning my doctoral studies in the U.S.

Throughout my academic journey, I have developed a strong interest in geospatial applications for water quality monitoring, particularly in underserved and data-limited regions. My current research focuses on using remote sensing and machine learning tools to support water quality assessment across New York State's inland lakes. This intersection of technology, environment, and equity deeply informs my long-term career goals.

I believe that active engagement in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts is critical to building a stronger, more just water resources community. Last year, I had the privilege of participating in the InFLOW (Introducing Future Leaders to Opportunities in Water) program organized by the New York Water Environment Association (NYWEA). This program offered mentorship, professional exposure, and peer support that made a lasting impact on my confidence and career outlook.

Building on that experience, I attended the NYWEA Annual Meeting this year as an awardee, where I had the chance to reconnect with members of the InFLOW program committee. Following the conference, I was invited to join both the InFLOW program and the DEI committee—an incredible opportunity to stay engaged and supported by a network of professionals and peers who share a commitment to equity in the water sector.

Receiving the AWRA DEI Professional Development Scholarship would further expand this network and allow me to engage with a broader community of like-minded professionals. I am eager to participate in national-level initiatives, connect with mentors, and continue building a career grounded in inclusion, collaboration, and environmental impact..

## JUSTIN TAGLE

**Project Manager**
**Chen Moore and Associates**

For seven years I have worked within Florida's unique and diverse water resources sector. I am a Hispanic professional engineer and I also identify as openly LGBTQ+; both identities I am proud to bear. My professional life has focused on the development of hydraulic and hydrologic modeling and design and construction of sustainable infrastructure solutions. These solutions address complicated flood resilience issues and stormwater management concerns. My academic study has consisted of a Bachelors and Masters of Science in Civil Engineering from the University of Florida, which gave rise to my interest in green infrastructure in city planning.

At Chen Moore and Associates I operate as a project manager, leading diverse teams as they devise and implement projects. These projects improve both environmental care also ability of communities to recover from disruption. Participating in DEI Initiatives such as the AWRA DEI Professional Development Scholarship will help me further my career by engaging with diverse professionals and mentors in this field. This engagement will not only enhance my perspective on certain issues but also empower me to be a better advocate for those communities without a voice. The

mentorship program will be key in this endeavor, granting me access to leaders in the field that can help me best inspire the next generation of diverse water resource engineers.

In essence, applying to this program is not just about the personal growth it can provide; it is about transforming the field of water resources engineering as a whole to reflect the diverse communities we serve. Through active participation in these DEI initiatives, I can be committed to building a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient future for all.

**LISA UMUTONI**
**Ph.D. Candidate – Agricultural Sciences**
**Clemson University**

I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Agricultural Sciences at Clemson University, where I focus on developing machine learning based irrigation decision support systems. I hold a Master of Science in Hydroinformatics from IHE Delft Institute for Water Education in the Netherlands, where my thesis explored the value of globally available data for detailed hydrological modeling. I also earned a Bachelor of Science in Water and Environmental Engineering from the University of Rwanda. My academic journey has been supported by competitive fellowships, including the Orange Knowledge scholarship, the USDA-SARE Graduate Student Fellowship, the Wade Stackhouse Fellowship, and the ASABE John C. Nye Graduate Fellowship. These opportunities, along with the 2024 ASCE South Carolina Section Young Civil Engineer of the Year Award, have significantly shaped my career and affirm my commitment to excellence in water resources management.

My foundation in water resources extends beyond academia to include diverse fieldwork and policy experiences. I have contributed to projects at the Nile Basin Initiative and the Global Water Partnership Eastern Africa, supporting transboundary water governance and integrated water resource management planning. These experiences gave me insight into the institutional, political, and environmental dimensions of shared water systems in the Nile Basin. In addition, I worked for the Global Green Growth Institute and Young Water Professionals Rwanda as a civil engineer, where I performed hydrological and hydraulic modeling and designed nature-based flood mitigation solutions in urban areas of Kigali.

As a Black African woman in STEM, I am often one of the few voices representing multiple underrepresented identities in technical, male-dominated fields like water resources management. These experiences have heightened my awareness of structural inequities in access to education, research tools, and professional opportunities. Participating in DEI initiatives will allow me to transform these challenges into action. I am committed to making scientific research more inclusive by mentoring underrepresented students, collaborating with marginalized communities, and advocating for the co-creation of context-relevant water solutions. My long-term vision is to lead community-driven, equitable water resource initiatives that bridge advanced research with real-world impact, especially in regions vulnerable to climate-induced water stress.