

Dear incoming student,

Let me start off by saying CONGRATULATIONS! You did it! You are about to embark on a wonderful, and at times difficult journey. I wanted to share some thoughts with you in the hopes that I can make your transition into higher education even the slightest bit easier.

When I first started at UCSC I was afraid, scared, nervous, anxious—you name it, that was me. It wouldn't be until years later however, that I realized why I felt this way. I wasn't afraid of leaving home or being in a new city (although to be fair, that did make me nervous). I wasn't particularly scared of "fitting in", although I did have a bit of culture shock going from being in a school composed almost entirely of Latinos, to being one of the only two Latinas in my calculus class. What I was really afraid of was being a fraud.

I started my journey as an undergraduate thinking I had gotten there by some sort of luck, that somewhere along the application process someone made a mistake and as a result I was offered admission. I spent so much time working so hard to compensate for the fact that I had gotten into school by "accident". I worked so hard because I was afraid someone would find out I was a fraud and should never have been able to set foot on campus at all.

If you at all think that you are an admissions mistake, please let go of that idea right now. By internalizing this notion I didn't realize how much harm I was doing to myself. I started losing faith in my abilities as a student and eventually that began to affect my academic performance. You are not here by luck. You have earned your spot at this school and you deserve it just as much as the rest of your classmates.

Of course, I realize that it is not easy to let go of this defeatist idea. I can't begin to tell you how many times I sat in class and thought to myself, "I feel so stupid! Why aren't I getting this as fast as the rest of the class? Why is everyone so much smarter than me?" At times when I thought this, I felt so alone. I felt like no one, not my friends, not my classmates and especially not my professors, could understand. You might feel this way sometimes and there is nothing wrong with that, but if you ever feel this way, don't forget that you are not alone. Many of your fellow classmates feel the exact same way. And I'm going to let you in on a little secret, even though I am a graduate student now, I still have my moments of paralyzing self-doubt, but when I think about all the support I have, those moments pass as quickly as they come.

For me, the support I found at UCSC consisted of some amazing professors and the wonderful staff at the Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP). I began to work at the EOP office my third year at UCSC. That very same year I was so fortunate to have taken classes with some very supportive professors. I had not only found a space that provided me with both academic and personal support, but I found amazing professors who enriched my education and inspired me to not only finish my undergraduate career as strongly as I could, but to pursue a career in academia, something that I would have never imagined was achievable.

I started to regain confidence in my skills, as well as take full advantage of all the resources available at school. I stopped caring if I sounded "stupid" when I asked a question during class. I began to stop by my professors' office hours, even just to say hello or to tell them how much I enjoyed the readings assigned for the week. And most importantly, I stopped feeling like a fraud. I no longer felt the need to prove that I belonged at the school or that I was as good as the rest of my classmates, because I knew I belonged there and I am just as good as the rest of my classmates and so are you!

Don't let the fear of sounding "stupid" prevent you from asking a question during class. Don't let intimidation stop you from going to your professor's office hours. Take full advantage

of your education, if not because you care about your education (which you should take very seriously), then because you are paying this school thousands of dollars to be there, so don't let your money and your time go to waste. Don't take classes with professors because they are "easy". Challenge yourself to take classes with professors who assign meaningful work and have high expectations of you. Trust me when I say there is nothing more rewarding than earning a good grade you know you worked hard for. Don't just do the minimum to get your diploma; you are capable of so much more than that.

When I began really challenging myself I came to see that I was capable of doing so much more than I even thought was possible. During my first methods course for my major, as our final assignment we had to write a research proposal. Through the process of writing this proposal, I fell in love with conducting research. I loved everything about it, from exploring the histories of a community, to choosing what methods to use for the project. I loved working on the proposal so much so that it would eventually become my senior thesis. That proposal is still one of the most important assignments I have ever had. That proposal now serves as the inspiration for my master's thesis and a research paper that will be published in a student journal this coming fall. All the hard work, all those frustrating nights and all those struggles I had to overcome paid off and continue to pay off today.

School is hard and challenging. There will be moments when you want to just scream in frustration. You may have moments when you will question whether you should be in that classroom to begin with. If at any time you feel this way, please just remember you are not alone. I was there, I am still there, and there are plenty of your peers that feel the exact same way. Take your moment to scream, feel frustrated, and in my case, even cry a little if necessary, but after you have your moment, brush yourself off and keep at it. As cliché as this may sound, you can do anything you set your mind to! It may be a difficult road ahead, but you can do it, and believe me when I say, the struggle is well worth it.

Best wishes,

Nataly Escobedo García