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So You Wanna Go to Grad School

For people considering graduate school, it can be one of the biggest decisions of their lives. It's a huge investment, but one that can pay off in many ways, whether it's better pay, a more prestigious position, expanded career opportunities, or simply the satisfaction of having deep knowledge of a subject they are passionate about.

"Once you crack the surface, graduate school is a place that offers students a chance to hone their research skills and create their own space in research," said Briana Muñoz-Flores, assistant director of outreach at UC Santa Barbara's Graduate Division. "In graduate school, they get to ask their own questions, whether it's something that has never been researched before, or something that has been researched, but never in that way."

For some would-be grad students — such as those who come from underrepresented populations, or are nontraditional students, or the first in their families to get an advanced degree — graduate school proves even more valuable. It's a shot at upward mobility, and not just for themselves, but for their families and communities. Yet for these students, the journey to grad school can be filled with confusion, insecurity and even a bit of impostor syndrome.

That's where UCSB's Academic Research Consortium (ARC) and the University of California's Leadership Excellence through Advanced Degrees (UC LEADS) programs come in. Aimed at promising students who are contemplating master's and doctoral degrees, but who might not know where to start, these programs light the way by offering a taste of the graduate life with research and mentorship, and guidance in

the process of getting into grad school.

Rising Above

Coming from gang- and violence-heavy South Central Los Angeles, ARC participant Anthony Amaral, a third-year undergrad at Cal State Dominguez Hills, has found a way to turn his observations of the area into valuable knowledge, elevating himself in the process.

“It’s very common to befriend someone that’s from a gang, or to come from a gang-related family yourself,” he said of life in South Central LA. So when he embarked on the seven-week ARC summer program under UC Santa Barbara sociology professor [Victor Rios](#), who himself grew up in similar circumstances, there was a connection.

“I understood his life story and he understood mine,” Amaral said. From connection flowed inspiration, and Amaral’s research topic: parental incarceration and its effects on their children. Aside from the academic mentorship, which Amaral said he hopes to parlay into doctoral studies at UCSB, the ARC program’s social and networking opportunities allowed him to come out of his shell.

“We offer a chance for students to become acquainted with the university, its faculty and graduate students, while also educating them on the graduate application process,” Muñoz-Flores said. “We also try to provide a safe space for them to ask questions they may be too shy to ask elsewhere, meet and interact with students from different campuses but similar background, and to gain access to tips and tricks from staff and graduate students.” Open to all who qualify, the ARC program at UC Santa Barbara, an officially designated Hispanic-Serving Institution, specifically targets talented and motivated Hispanic and Latinx students in southern California “who can benefit from additional academic support and career development.”

The networking opportunities could prove invaluable to Amaral in the future, beyond academia, as he hopes eventually to bring his work, in the form of outreach, to at-risk youth and their families.

“In 10 years I want to have my Ph.D., but I also want to be working with individuals in juvenile halls, speaking with local gang leaders and trying to resolve conflict in the streets and in the prison system,” said Amaral, who also hopes to lead his own nonprofit assisting at-risk youth.

For the Love of the Ocean

Bay Area native Tina Nguyen grew up a stone's throw from the shore, and had a STEM-heavy education at Cupertino High School. One might think her location and focus on science would lend themselves well to opportunities to study the ocean.

"Strangely enough, even though I grew up in the Bay Area, there wasn't really any focus on marine science," said Nguyen, a third-year undergrad at UC Davis. That, along with her status as the first in her family to go to college, meant she wasn't just paving her own way; she was trailblazing for her younger and future family members. "I didn't know how where to start, or how to get started," she said.

"Oftentimes, our students do not know anyone who has gone to college, let alone grad school, so they do not have anyone to ask questions of or get advice from about the application process," said Muñoz-Flores.

UC LEADS fills that gap by pairing participants with faculty and current grad students and creating an environment where no question is too large or too small. The two-year program is open to upper division undergraduate students "with the potential to succeed in (scientific) disciplines, but who have experienced situations or conditions that have adversely impacted their advancement in their field of study."

For Nguyen, that means she not only gets assistance with the application and preparation process, she also gets her research feet wet. So by the time she embarks on her advanced science degree, she's ready for what the academic life throws at her.

"I really like it so far," said Nguyen, whose focus is on the physiology of fishes and their performance under various diet and temperature conditions, working with UCSB marine biologist Erika Eliason. "(The UCSB program) is a smaller program, which I like because you get to know everyone a little bit better." In addition to her research, Nguyen hopes to be able to widen access to marine studies in her home community.

ARC and UC LEADS scholars' efforts will come to some fruition Friday, Aug. 9, via presentations given by the students as their summer research draws to a close.

"I hope they utilize us as contacts in the future, as well as keep in touch with their cohort, faculty mentor and graduate student mentor," Muñoz-Flores said. "I also

hope that we have instilled enough knowledge about the process, that they have confidence when applying to graduate school.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.