

High School Students Experience College Life First Hand in UCSD Ambassadors of Academic Achievement Program

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For Berenice Avila, a senior last year at Chula Vista's Castle Park High School, meeting Megan Bressemer, her undergraduate student mentor in the Ambassadors of Academic Achievement (A 3) Program at the University of California, San Diego, was a special occasion.

It was one of Berenice's first visits to UCSD as a high school student, and to make her feel more at home, Megan did not take her straight to the lecture halls or libraries. Instead, she took Berenice first to the Cliffs, a hidden spot near campus overlooking the Pacific Ocean and known primarily only to UCSD students.

To Berenice, who last fall became the first in her family to attend college when she began at UCSD, the message was clear: It was if Megan was saying "Welcome to the UCSD family."

This is the kind of personal touch that UCSD undergraduate mentors are giving high school students through the A 3 Program, a growing outreach initiative at the university introduced and administered by Student Educational Advancement (SEA) under Student Affairs. The program exposes high school students from underserved areas to UCSD, including academic and student life.

Since the 2004-2005 school year when A 3 began as a pilot program at Castle Park High School (in the Sweetwater Union High School District), an increasing number of juniors and seniors there are experiencing A 3 's personal approach to college prep through interaction with UCSD mentors. This includes attending campus classes and lectures, meeting faculty, laboratory visits, campus tours, and dining with their mentors. And for an added taste of campus life, high school seniors in the program who have been accepted for admission to UCSD are invited to participate in an overnight visit with their mentor in a campus residency hall.

Following initial A 3 interaction, both mentors and mentees are encouraged to keep in touch with each other via email or telephone, and by arranging other meetings on their own.

The program is a component of the UCSD *Healing the Community* initiative under SEA, and is intended to increase the number of talented first-generation college students admitted to UCSD and to other higher education institutions. Many students in A 3 are seeking careers in science, medicine, and health-related disciplines.

"We are very pleased with the promise this program holds in reaching out in a highly personal way to first-generation college students in the Sweetwater school district and other school districts in our area," says Loren Thompson, Assistant Vice Chancellor, SEA. "We would especially like to thank Robert Manroe, Castle Park High science coordinator, who as our A 3 liaison at Castle Park has served as a vital link to the program in identifying student participants and helping us communicate with their parents on A 3 and its activities."

In addition to existing Castle Park participation, plans are also being discussed to expand the program in the coming months to an additional high school in the San Diego area.

To participate in A 3 , high school juniors and seniors are nominated by their science teachers. A 3 participation and campus visit activities are closely coordinated with high school administration and students' parents, in addition to appropriate UCSD personnel (including resident deans in the case of overnight campus stays).

This year's A 3 visits were not only successful in exposing high school students to university life, but in also establishing an important stepping stone for future growth, says Keitha Libman, A 3 Program Representative.. The number of high school students participating in the program this year, she reports, more than doubled to 47, and of the 23 high school seniors who participated this year, 12 will be incoming UCSD freshmen this fall.

Equally impressive is the increase in the number of UCSD undergraduates who are participating as mentors in the program, says Libman. That total rose from 11 last year to 22 trained A 3 mentors this year. A 3 mentors come from a wide range of academic majors --from pre-med and biological science to psychology and architecture.

Mentors undergo an in-depth orientation before interacting with their mentees. Training covers such topics as prescribed duties and responsibilities of an A 3 mentor, leadership and listening skills, how to interact effectively with their mentees, and overview of appropriate university rules and regulations.

"Everyone really had a good time this year and provided us with excellent comments to build upon for next year," Libman recalls of the visits. She adds that "at the top of the list" of comments from high school students was the relationship and one-on-one time they had with their mentors. "That's why we're doing this program," says Libman, "so these students can make the connection with UCSD mentors to make them feel more comfortable on college campuses, and especially the UCSD campus."

In addition to the A 3 Program's personalized approach to enhancing interaction between mentors and mentees, Libman also attributes this year's success to the strong support the program has enjoyed from UCSD faculty, staff and resident deans. "One reason the program works so well is because we have the support of many individuals here, which contributes to the students feeling that they are a part of the UCSD family," she says.

And it is A 3 's "family atmosphere" that continues to foster the relationship between Berenice Avila and Megan Bressemer.

Megan, who will be a junior in the fall, has served as an A 3 mentor since 2006 and last year was also appointed the program's Student Liaison, assisting Libman in recruiting undergraduate mentors and administering A 3 . Megan finds personal satisfaction in her mentoring role:

"As a mentor, you're helping people who really need you because they're first-generation college students who don't have family members to act as college role models. You're really the one they rely on."

It was largely due to Berenice's positive experience with Megan that led Berenice to join the program herself as a mentor when she enrolled at UCSD last year as a freshman. As a result, she has been instrumental in helping former classmates at Castle Park become familiar with college life and academic preparation. "The environment that Megan showed me through A 3 made me feel so comfortable that I wanted to give back and help other students feel as comfortable as I did," explains Berenice, a pre-med and math major who aspires to be a pediatrician. She adds: "Through A 3 you can make a real connection, and a friend. As long as you know someone on campus, going to a four-year university isn't so intimidating and you feel like you're not alone."

Interestingly, one A 3 student at Castle Park that Berenice was able to help this year was her own younger sister Abigail who will be entering UCSD in the fall as a freshman, and who plans to also serve as an A 3 mentor. In addition, their youngersister Karen will be a senior this fall at Castle Park and is thinking of joining A 3 as well - adding to the program's "family atmosphere."

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