

UC San Diego

# UC San Diego News Center

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*Photo by Erik Jepsen/UC San Diego Publications*

## Triton Alumnae: Making an Impact

### Triton Alumnae Making an Impact: Paola Avila, '97

**She works as....**Vice president for international business affairs at the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

**The best part of her day is...**working with people at both the Chamber of Commerce and in my broader network. We cheer each other on.

**Advice every UC San Diego student should know...**Be careful what you post on social media! When I hire someone, even as an intern, I go to social media, and you would be surprised what people post. A good rule is if you wouldn't be comfortable with your grandma seeing your post, don't share it.

**One thing people would be surprised to learn about her is...**I'm an introvert. My job is so social that people don't see that part of me. I love to read and could spend hours by myself with a book.

**All in the Triton family...**My older brother and sister also attended UC San Diego, and there was one year when the three of us overlapped. It was great to be able to grab lunch with them and to have that common college experience to bond us even more.

UC San Diego graduate Paola Avila had no desire to work anywhere near politics. As an undergraduate studying economics, her dream career was in international business. She started at UC San Diego knowing three languages—Spanish, English and French—and signed up for Japanese classes to better prepare her for a global career.

But when Avila got talked into helping with a local political campaign—just something to try while she was figuring out her next step, she assured herself—she found her passion, and it set her on a course that would take her through mayoral races and city hall to the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, where she currently serves as vice president for international business affairs.

"I'm super passionate about my work," said Avila. "When I took that first campaign job, it looked like a step away from my degree and my goal, but it turned out to be a critical experience for getting where I am today. I learned how policymakers make their decisions, and what information or support they need in order to back a particular issue."

Avila's work involves advocating at the local, state and federal levels for public policies that enable cross-border commerce. Much of her day-to-day work centers around meetings with trade organizations, government officials, private companies and other stakeholders to talk through different issues and build coalitions to support the San Diego business community. Her work takes her from San Diego to Sacramento, Mexico City and Washington, D.C., as well as border states such as Texas and Arizona.

Some of the more contentious national issues of the day—NAFTA, border security and immigration, among others—are frequent topics of discussion in her meetings both locally and outside of California. Educational outreach to the San Diego community, Avila says, has become increasingly important.

"Take NAFTA for example. Two years ago, no one was talking about it," she said. "One of the reasons we're having trouble now is that employees who are affected by NAFTA don't know it, and don't know what it would mean for their job if the agreement ended. A lot of the work we are doing right now is educational, to share information about these issues both inside and outside of our region."

## **From UC San Diego to the Chamber of Commerce**

It's rarely a straight path from a college degree to your dream career, as Avila often reminds her own daughters.

Avila majored in economics at Eleanor Roosevelt College—then known as Fifth College—with the goal of pursuing a career in international business. She worked her way through school, typically logging 30 hours or more each week, and also ran track and field and cross country.

During her junior year, she took a job with a local stock brokerage firm, where she had the opportunity to work with international clients.

“It was really interesting,” she said. “I love numbers and working in the financial markets, but it's a tough industry. After nearly two years, I was burned out.”

That ending led to a new direction, when one of the brokers she worked with suggested trying politics and pointed her to an opportunity to join a local campaign. She surprised herself when she realized she loved the work, and was good at it.

Avila went on to work on the mayoral campaign for Dick Murphy. When he was elected, Avila moved to city hall. She served as deputy chief of staff for the Mayor of San Diego from 2000 to 2005, managing office staff and budget and binational affairs. She then started her own public affairs consulting business assisting large and small companies with economic development opportunities and land use planning. She later served in Senator Ben Hueso's office, advising on policy areas including water, energy and economic development.

One of the skills that set Avila apart early on—and that she thanks UC San Diego for—is her knowledge of Microsoft Excel. As an economics major, she was required to take a course dedicated to learning the program. It turned out to be a valuable skill on the campaign trail, enabling her to analyze voter trends and potential outcomes in different Election Day scenarios.

“Back then, there wasn't the technology that we have today for analyzing voter trends, but I was able to do this using what I learned in that Excel class,” she said. “The candidate and my boss loved it. It set me apart, and it's one thing I'll never be able to forget.”

## **Striking a balance between work and family**

Avila always knew she wanted to be a parent, even before she knew what kind of career she wanted. She had her first daughter not long after graduating from UC San Diego. As a single mom in a brand new job—one that demanded long hours and weekends—Avila says that she was fortunate to have the support of her family and an employer that allowed her to bring her daughter to work. In fact, it was in a campaign meeting that her 10-month-old learned to walk.

While it wasn't always easy, Avila is proud that she has taken on every opportunity, challenge and promotion presented to her. She has also made sure to find balance, taking off days to spend time with her children and being there to pick them up from school.

"We so often doubt ourselves," she said. "But you can absolutely be an excellent mom and leader—you don't have to choose between the two. It's hard, but you have to make those decisions without regret or guilt. For me, I think that exposing my daughter to work events and teaching her to be independent at an early age has helped make her the strong woman that she is today. And that's what I'm most proud of."

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