

# Career Advice

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## SPEAKERS

Brianne Wada, Eliza, Jessica Kongthong, Dev

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### **Jessica Kongthong** 00:00

Hi, welcome to Triton Tools and Tidbits. I am one of your hosts today, Jessica Kongthong from the Career Center. I'm one of the Associate Directors and I work with mostly pre-med and pre-health students. I'm here today with my co-host and colleague...

### **Brianne Wada** 00:09

Brianne Wada, Associate Director of Engineering and proud alumna of the university.

### **Jessica Kongthong** 00:12

So, we're excited to talk about the career search and the professional school prep-search, especially during a pandemic. We're really grateful to have two special guests today, and I want them to introduce themselves. Dev, would you like to introduce yourself?

### **Dev** 00:18

Hello, I'm Dev. I recently graduated just last quarter, proud to be a UCSD alumni now. I studied electrical engineering, and I actually came here when I was five, with my parents from India. And now I've already graduated college. Time really flies.

### **Jessica Kongthong** 00:58

Awesome. And also, Dev - if you could include what you're currently doing or about to do.

### **Dev** 01:06

Yeah, so it's actually a really exciting time. I just finished my second week of full-time work at Tesla. And you know, that's always a super exciting.

### **Jessica Kongthong** 01:16

Great, thank you for sharing. Eliza?

### **Eliza** 01:20

Hi, good morning everyone. My name is Eliza, and I'm also UCSD alumni. I graduated spring of 2020. Hashtag COVID-year. I studied human biology in college, and I am currently a medical school

applicant. So, I have just completed and concluded the application cycle. I was accepted to three medical schools and I will be attending UCLA this upcoming summer. A little bit about me: I'm a first-generation college student, I am a daughter of two Latino immigrants, and I'm very excited to venture into my career right now.

**Brianne Wada** 02:00

Wow, I am - that is amazing, the both of you. I think - just, amazing experiences coming in.

**Jessica Kongthong** 02:08

And congratulations!

**Brianne Wada** 02:10

Absolutely. Absolutely. I guess, let's just get right into the heart of things. What did you both do last year to really ramp up either getting a job, or going and getting into med school?

**Eliza** 02:35

For me, I think med school is a very long and daunting process. And as our Career Center - and as many student, faculty and advisors advise us to do - is all about preparation. So, the year before applying to medical school, you're trying to get your letters of recommendations in, you're trying to still get stellar grades. But the thing that is the most important is trying to figure out what your gaps are when applying to medical school. Looking at your application as a whole, seeing - what parts of my application could I improve within this last year? And I think, for me personally, it was not even finding my gaps, but really trying to see and show the admissions committee [the way I want them to see me]. Really wanting to try see what my purpose is and wondering if my application reflects that. And whether or not the activities that I have been involved in were able to prove that this is my purpose, and that this is what I want to do. So, for example, my last year I was really involved in community engagement, and trying to address societal injustices within some community organizations that I'd established. My last year was really trying to see if my purpose of continuing this work as a physician was really reflected in my application.

**Brianne Wada** 04:00

And how did you identify some of those gaps, Eliza?

**Eliza** 04:05

Yeah, so let's say, for one example, of one of the gaps that I was missing was the MCAT. I did not take several classes that I needed to prepare for it. So, I made sure within my last year that I planned to take those courses ahead of time, rather than waiting until the last minute, and applying, or taking them last minute, and then end up taking the MCAT shortly after completing those courses. Trying to really gauge what parts of my application were missing, and seeing how could I prepare to not have those work against me in the future.

**Brianne Wada** 04:41

Yeah, I'm hearing a lot of premeditating, pre-planning. I can only imagine. I think that that's key - and we'll get into this too because the last year was an interesting year, right? We're in the pandemic.

Before we even go in that direction and get your feedback on that, I want to hear from Dev on his experience with what he did in the last year to really ramp up getting that sweet gig at Tesla.

**Dev** 05:21

Yeah, so building off of what both you and Eliza said regarding preparation, it is a really long process to interview and then end up getting that job. You really only have one document to support you throughout this whole process for getting a job, which is generally just your resume. So, I constantly sought out criticism from my close friends. And obviously, the Career Center was a great help in that regard - reviewing my resume and making it better. But the other part is broadening my scope of opportunity. Particularly because of the pandemic, it gave me a sense of urgency that I really should get my career started as soon as I graduate. There's really limited opportunity at this time, is what it felt like as a student. I started exploring different fields and seeing what they required of candidates, and then improving the skills throughout the entire time I had while I was in school applying for jobs. It was constantly iterating on the most important document I had at the time to get a job - which was my resume - in addition to just getting better at the skills that were being required at different job fields that I was interested in.

06:35

Dev, I know you on a personal level, too. So, I think we'll get there in a couple of questions ahead on other things that you also did to get your job at Tesla - in terms of networking, and things like that. So, looking forward to hearing a lot more on that end.

**Jessica Kongthong** 06:54

One thing I want to mention too, is Dev and Eliza were both Career Peer Educators. So, they worked at the Career Center, they were peer advisors - that's how we know them. And we're really impressed with all of your successes, and so excited to hear more. I think you've already provided some great insight. One of the things Brianne mentioned earlier was the pandemic. Last year was interesting. The pandemic hit. We want to know, and listeners want to know - did your career plans change? If so, how did you have to pivot in any way? What were some of the obstacles you had to overcome? Can you share some advice with our listeners today? Eliza, let's start with you.

**Eliza** 07:36

Yeah, of course. My career plans changed dramatically and drastically. When I was in my last year of college, I was planning to apply for the BS-MS program, which was a dual degree where you get your bachelor's and your master's degree in five years. And I already prepared to enroll myself in that program. I took research courses, I did all the applications, I was working on my research project, I was able to get my lab approved to be a part of that program. And because of the pandemic, I unfortunately lost my lab job, which was kind of a burn, because I'd worked there since my first year - which I had also caused me to lose my research opportunity, because we lost funding. And that made me ill-qualified to even apply for the BS-MS program. It was a big slap in the face, to be quite frank with you. I'm a very focused person. So, I always have plan A and I always work towards Plan A, and I don't really tend to think about Plan B or Plan C. So, during that moment, when I became more serious, I began to question what was my next step, and what else do I have to do now? That brought me back to the drawing board - figuring out how do I still navigate this career in trying to apply to medicine and medical school, and also figuring out what to do during my gap years, because that's something that's

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very important and medical school commission on committees look at. By being able to have time to really reflect on myself and my true passions, I began to realize that all the research is something that I'm passionate about, I'm interested in. My true goal in life is to really support my community and communities of color that are often underrepresented in medicine. That made me kind of broaden my scope, finding other opportunities where I can actually engage myself in those activities. That's what I am doing right now. So actually - I applied for AmeriCorps Health Fellows Program. I'm a Patient Navigator right now at a federally qualified health center, and I'm addressing healthcare disparities in LA County. So, although it was kind of unfortunate at the beginning - losing my job and not being able to apply for this program and advance my career and my education, I think it was kind of a blessing in disguise, because it really solidified my purpose of what I want to do with my life and in my career. I just want you to learn - make sure you plan, and make sure you have A, B and C in case one thing does not work out.

**Jessica Kongthong 10:39**

Well, I loved what you just shared Eliza. I think it speaks to your ability to adapt, to reflect, and to pivot. And I think that's really great advice for the listeners and students getting ready to graduate. I also think you shared a lot about grit and tenacity, and really being able to say, "Things aren't always gonna go your way, that's part of life, this is a really great life lesson." And you didn't let that keep you down, you pivoted and found something that's even more meaningful, and still moved forward on your path. And here you are, going to UCLA. Awesome, great job.

**Brianne Wada 11:16**

I just gotta chime in - that reflection is just so good, and I hope folks are soaking it in. I think another big piece you brought up Eliza was the self-reflection piece. Sometimes we do have to pivot in life - and we just have to come back to what it is that we're really passionate about. What is it that we really care about? And when we focus in on that, then other opportunities start to blossom out of it. I know when you're in the thick of it, when things just seem very unsure it's like a splatter all over the place. But I promise you - the listeners - just really reflect and move toward what you, in your heart of hearts, want to do. Things are gonna happen for you in addition to the plan A, B and C, that you come up with to get to the endpoint. But I really do think self-reflection is super key in any career choice or grad school program that you decide to go into.

**Eliza 12:23**

Exactly. I think resilience is a very big key in any industry or in any graduate program, and the act of being resilient and trying to persist in the face of adversity is something that many committees look for. [No matter the] issues or adversity that students face, and obstacles that are faced - always trying to weigh, to reflect, and trying to overcome them in some way, shape, or form.

**Jessica Kongthong 12:44**

I really like how you talked about - Eliza - when you get to a roadblock, you're not getting what you want - something that you planned for - there's always another way to get to where you want, you just have to look for and be open to it. So, I really love those examples and insights you've provided. Let's turn it over to Dev. Dev, let's hear what you have to say.

**Dev 13:17**

With the pandemic, it really reminds me of this quote "everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face." And as a student, when you're approaching your final year - and say there was no pandemic - you can really let your dreams run wild and free in terms of what you want to do and your career. What job you see yourself working. But when you look at the reality of the situation with the pandemic, and you know that getting a job takes a couple of months -specifically in like the field of engineering, there is like a peak hiring season, which is typically around fall quarter - knowing that you're very constrained by time is kind of a scary situation to be in, because you never really account for it. But knowing the significance of what you do immensely increases every day. I wouldn't say my career plans changed, because my career plan was, to be quite frank, really broad. I just wanted to be an engineer. But the way in which you can achieve that does change. In-person career fairs being removed, and being replaced by virtual info sessions - or just companies not posting as many jobs as they usually would - changes what you see yourself working in. The way my career plans changed - I just wanted to get my foot in the door, and then see where it goes from there. That's the one thing about this pandemic that I think I've learned, which is, take it one day at a time. Don't make plans for super long periods of time, because more than often you'll get punched in the face. And you'll have to change up that plan. This pandemic really made me realize the significance of what you do every day. And just focusing on a week-long plan and seeing how that goes. And if it goes in your favor, then continue that, or change it up.

**Jessica Kongthong 15:28**

I love what you share, Dev, when you say 'what you do every day matters.' It's really [about] planting seeds, right? You never know what's going to sprout someday. Making those connections and focusing on the present moment and what you're doing, to really have the outcome you want at some point. I think that's really great advice.

**Brianne Wada 15:54**

I just love that you just kept it so real - you're gonna feel like you're gonna be punched in the face. Because it's gonna throw you for a loop, right? Why do you get into these moments? I think something that UCSD students do really well - we're all high achievers, and I think that with that comes that grit and that tenacity that we're talking about, as well. Maybe we're not going to get that one goal that we might have had our eyes set on. We start thinking okay, 'now, what's next? How do we get to that next level?' In that moment, I think I'm going to encourage folks to have some grace towards yourself in that moment. You might feel like you got punched in the face, and that's okay. Embrace those feelings. But be nice to yourself. When that inner critic comes out, it could eat you alive and send you down the rabbit hole - far down the rabbit hole - and we don't want to go too far down the rabbit hole. So just be nice to yourselves. Know that know that the environment - we were in a pandemic. There weren't as many positions. But thankfully, some companies were still able to pivot and move remote. And I do think - hearing from employers, just to share with listeners - I do think employers are going to start posting more positions, as we ramp up for the upcoming year. So, keep your eyes and ears out, because there will be some opportunities. But I love what you're saying, one step in front of the other - or one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. You'll get there. And I love what you share, to plant the seeds. Plant the seed, get a little sunshine, put a little water on it. Talk nicely to it. Yeah, we're gonna get there.

**Jessica Kongthong** 17:59

I just wanted to add to what you said, Brianne, I'm really all about self-care for all of us during this time - physical, emotional, mental health is absolutely essential. So really find ways to take care of yourself.

**Brianne Wada** 18:13

Yes, and if you all need a cheerleader, that is what we're here at the Career Center. We are here to pick you up when you are down, give you a little virtual hug or whatever it is, and then and then give you some tactics on how to move forward. Dev, Eliza, you shared some really, really awesome insight. I'm kind of curious if maybe you can reverse engineer - Dev, engineer over there - can you reverse engineer what you did? Because, as mentioned, you ended up in this cool job at Tesla that you got into a few med schools. Give it up, girl, I just have to give it up for you. That's a lot of work. Let's just keep it simple. Can you can you think of one or two things that were instrumental to your success?

**Dev** 19:16

So, the one thing that I like looking back was that I really zoomed in on the factors that I could control to guide me towards the outcome that I wanted. When you really zoom in, you realize there's very few things that are involved in this process, which is really good. Because, surprisingly, you do have a high influence on the outcomes. So, for getting a job - you only have one sheet of paper, and there's only so many words that you can fit on it. So, I just started brainstorming what is really important to me that I wanted recruiters and hiring managers who are evaluating need to know. How can I fit that onto this one sheet of paper? So, I really just zoomed in, and then each day, just researched different companies or fields, and got better at the skills that you're listing on that resume. Or try to gain some experience if you can, even though it's a pandemic. But really just sit down and zoom in and figure out what is really important to you, and then just work on that for that day, and just see how that goes. Moving away from just thinking of plans that span weeks or months - take it a day at a time. That's what I did. And you'll find opportunities that you'd never thought existed.

**Brianne Wada** 20:42

that's such an interesting reflection and feedback, because I think we can get caught up in the goal-setting a lot of times - which does play an important role, but it can also stifle either the ingenuity or adaptability to situations. I love that, and it's such an engineer approach, Dev. I just love that.

**Jessica Kongthong** 21:15

I also - I love your advice. It's very Zen to me. You talk about factors you can control, and being in the present moment. It's a lot of depth and I love it.

**Brianne Wada** 21:30

Totally. Eliza - how about you? Can you think of one or two things that were really instrumental to your success?

**Eliza** 21:40

I just want to first say that I that I resonated a lot with what Dev said, especially the little line that he said about when you apply to something, you're only representing yourself in a sheet of paper. And quite often, that's very similar when applying to medical school - you have your primary application. Whatever is on that paper - you're just waiting and praying that somebody takes the bait and brings you

on to the next level. So, I did read resonate a lot with what Dev said for that, and obviously trying to work on how to present yourself in that form. But I think the advice that I would give that has been instrumental to my success is really the ability to have a mentor during my application process. So, I was actually a part of this pipeline program called Puma, which I'm giving a little plug right now, for students to apply to. But if it was not for the program, or for my mentor, I would actually not be here right now, because there are many moments in the application cycle where I did not have confidence in myself and I felt that I was not good enough. I wanted to quit and withdraw. Applying in the middle of a pandemic - there's more underlying barriers that come with that. So, having issues with my family, and having to figure out how to pay for certain things and whatnot, it was quite difficult all-in-all. The ability to have a mentor that believes in you, when you don't believe in yourself - I think it was the most important thing that allowed me to push through and continue to move forward.

**Jessica Kongthong 23:28**

I think that's a really important point Eliza. Having mentors - I know we didn't really touch upon this yet - but I'm wondering if you could both share a little bit about finding those mentors, because whatever you doing - whether it's getting a job, or going to medical school, or any other graduate school - you always need some sort of reference. You always need some sort of recommendation, someone to support you and vouch for you. What are your some of your tips on actually developing, cultivating, and finding those mentors?

**Eliza 24:00**

I can start off. With me, it was quite difficult at first to try to find individuals who I wanted to use as a mentor - or as a future letter of recommendation. But the reason it was quite difficult for me was because I did not want to be the type of person who forced a relationship. There were so many professors or faculty members that I met, that although they were supportive, I felt that there was not a very strong relationship that could grow between me and the individual. And so, I decided to find individuals and professors who a lot whose own missions - and their own purposes - aligned with my own. That made me venture out into taking classes that I was personally interested in that were not health-related, that were not bio-related. That allowed me to find individuals that I was more attuned with, and it was easier to grow relationships in that way. Always asking them if they want to support you in your career - asking them, and developing that relationship one-on-one, whether that be Coffee With a Prof, whether that be having a short meeting with them and asking whether or not they have any opportunities that they know of that you could apply to. I think that's the best way of letting it grow organically and not letting a relationship or connection be forced. I think those are the relationships that are more meaningful, and you'll get the most out of as well.

**Jessica Kongthong 25:38**

Yeah, I love that. I think that's important to talk about authentic relationships, right? Making sure these are genuine mentorships. I really liked what you said about finding people who share the same mission - it's almost like finding people that share that same core values as you make it easier to build a real, authentic relationship that way.

**Dev 26:04**

Yeah, adding on to what Eliza said - that phrase really resonates with me. What you said, Jessica, which was building authentic relationships - coming to UCSD my freshman year seemed really

intimidating because I didn't really know anybody in my field. Whenever I tried to connect with other people, the one thing that always helped me in terms of getting mentors was being very clear with intent of the questions that I was asking. I feel like the word - finding a mentor - 'mentors' seems really intimidating. Because when you're a college student, it's like, "I don't really know anybody, and I don't really have any insight to offer yet because I'm still learning stuff as I go." Being super clear with intent and understanding that there's different types of mentors along the way that you'll meet - some people, you'll keep in touch over the years; others, you may only have met once, but that one meeting alone will be equally as significant and valuable to you. Being extremely precise with your intent - that leads to the questions that you're asking while you're meeting with them - really helps build that organic relationship. And it turns out that we've been having mentors all along - we just haven't put a word to it. It's really just connecting with other humans - being super clear with intent will lead you to very organic relationships. And those will - most likely during college - end up being mentors that you'll find.

**Brianne Wada** 27:49

That is just so beautiful. When we do hear the word 'mentor,' I think there is kind of a question mark around it. What exactly does that mean? And I think sometimes folks - myself included - will think, "oh, it's gonna be this really rich, deep experience." Sometimes it's not that way. It's kind of like when we're finding friends. Some people you're gonna connect with really, really well, while others are just kind of acquaintances, but you're still collegial. But they're still looking out for you. I think it's really important to hone-in on what you're saying - that word, mentor. I read a book called Forget A Mentor, Find A Sponsor, and they broke it down. There are different folks that are out there - there are mentors, but there's also coaches, and there's also sponsors. And sponsors are actually people who are going to speak positively about you when you're not in the room - so this is when you get recommended for things, or get brought on to projects that maybe you weren't expecting, and people reach out to you based on what they know about you. I think that goes back to what we were discussing, too - just building those authentic relationships, staying true to who you are, what your passions are, and building that community along the way. Because I think networking - it's a life skill.

**Jessica Kongthong** 29:20

Yeah, it is. It's like you said, Brianna; lifelong skill. Agreed.

**Brianne Wada** 29:26

Dev, can you touch just a little bit on what you did for Tesla? You and I had really in-depth conversations about that, and there was some networking that went into that with you.

**Dev** 29:42

So, my relationship of working at Tesla actually goes all the way back to my freshman - near the end of my freshman year. That was the first ever interview that I had with them. It was for an internship. I initially didn't get the position for the summer, but I kept in touch with the manager, and just kept him up to date on what I was working on and what I was learning in school - and I was offered a position for the fall instead. So, I think that really builds off of what we talked about as mentors, or sponsors, or coaches - keeping in touch with people is super important. And then, especially at Tesla - I don't know how much I'm allowed to say about what I do now - but it's definitely an exciting time to be there. The product is super great - you see it out on the road. It's not like it was one thing that just happened - it was talking to many different people in this field throughout my entire freshman year. I really like this

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quote about luck, which is "luck is simply when preparedness meets opportunity." I felt like I got really lucky because it just so happened that the manager I spoke with worked at Tesla. It's not like I was actively seeking out certain companies or positions. I think if you just keep at it, eventually luck will find you.

**Jessica Kongthong 31:09**

Awesome. So, we want to start wrapping up. Maybe give some good, lasting advice for our listeners from both Eliza and Dev. What advice could you give to listeners who feel their goals are at a standstill right now, especially due to the pandemic? Can you give some great soundbites for our listeners to take away?

**Dev 31:39**

I can go first. Whenever somebody asks for advice - especially in college - always try to think of something tangible that you can do, maybe even today. If you ever feel like you're at a standstill - pursuit of a career, or getting into med school, or even just getting started - I think UCSD has tremendous resources to help you out. One of those really being the Career Center. If you ever feel stuck at anything go talk to the Career Center because I think when you talk over your problems with other people, it really gives you a sense of clarity. When you have clarity, you can think better, and then make better decisions of what to do in the future. It may not sound like some grand piece of advice - but literally just go to the Career Center and talk out why you think you're at a standstill, because you just sometimes need somebody else's perspective. Personally, my relationships with the Career Center have been super positive. I would recommend anybody at any level to talk it out with the amazing people at the Career Center.

**Eliza 32:50**

I think one of the best pieces of advice I can give other students is the ability to be vulnerable, and allowing yourself to have the space to speak with others about issues that you may have, whether that be personally or within your career. The reason that I say this is because when you are a student - in any part of your life, you are going to be facing challenges. You have to not to be so hard on yourself, but also to remind yourself that you are human, it's okay to make mistakes and to ask for help. My best piece of advice for anybody is to ask for help. It's okay to allow other people to pick you up when you don't feel like picking yourself up.

**Brianne Wada 33:32**

Oh my gosh, yes, yes, yes, yes. All the way. We're here to help you dissect all that. I know a lot of my colleagues at the Career Center feel the same way. We do see that the way you choose a career - decision-making that you're doing in your head - it's all impacted by identities, by life situations, life circumstances. This is the real world. This is real life and we're here to help coach you along the way. We can help give you better advice if you feel comfortable being open with us about that. I firmly believe in that philosophy. I know a lot of my colleagues at the Career Center do as well. I love that - come out with your authentic self and let's help you get along the way. We just want to thank you all - Eliza, Dev. This was great. Awesome advice. Awesome job. We really hope to stay connected with y'all, especially as alumni now. You're always welcome back to campus, and we're looking forward to staying connected with you all. A big thanks to the Triton Tools and Tidbits crew for making this all

happen and putting it together. We really appreciate the invite to do this and we look forward to seeing you all at the Career Center.

**Jessica Kongthong** 35:07

Yeah. Congratulations, you two. Great job. Thanks for your insight. Thank you for experiencing our podcasts on career search and professional school prep during the pandemic. I'm your host, Jessica Kongthong, along with my colleague Brienne Wada. We hope you have a great week, and we'll see you next week on Triton Tools and Tidbits.