Leadership in Engineering Advancement, Diversity and Retention

Student Testimonials
Hi, my name is Cristina Ochoa and I am a second year biomedical engineering student. During high school I was introduced to engineering through science and engineering competitions. Being able to create something with my hands and using scientific concepts to build them was enjoyable to me. I also wanted to make a difference in people’s lives someday so I decided to go with Biomedical Engineering.

During a UC Davis college tour, I instantly fell in love with the campus. If I wanted boba, ice cream, or to take a walk in the park or arboretum, it was all a bike ride away. It not only felt like home to me, it also had one of the best engineering programs. The sense of community and belonging was unique to UC Davis. When college decisions came out, I was committed to Davis from the start.

As a first generation student, transitioning to college would not be an easy task. Summer before school began, I received an email from LEADR and I never imagined how much easier and enjoyable it would make my transition. LEADR friends took the same classes and had similar backgrounds. I was always guaranteed to find someone from LEADR at the dining commons and in lectures of over 100 students. When math classes were a breeze during high school, they became difficult for me in college; but I always had someone to struggle with and learn with. Within LEADR you will find a family and mentors. We struggle together, learn together, and overall we grow together. If you have a chance to join the LEADR family, please do!
All throughout high school, I thought I was special stuff – straight A’s, solid test scores, and extracurriculars to bat, so I only applied to four schools, all of them elite. After receiving three rejection letters, I was crushed, until Davis gave me the chance I thought I deserved. I was humbled – or so I thought.

My first two years at Davis were terrible. I overloaded myself with work and thoroughly tanked my GPA. After entertaining different potential career paths, I turned my attention to graduate school. But as a junior with 2.6 GPA, I became distraught and disillusioned. So, I did what any rational person would do – I left the country.

In the spring and summer of 2019, I had the opportunity to spend a semester in Aachen, Germany. Five months from all my friends had some drastic effects on me – many of them negative, yes – but in my time of relative solitude, I discovered effective study patterns, pondered my future career, and finally had the humbling experience I thought I found in my string of rejections letters.

Several months and a lot of hard work later, I’ve just had best quarter of my undergraduate career - I’m finally on track. But the work is never done. The grind never stops. As first-generation students, we have to constantly push ourselves harder, be smarter about our time, and demonstrate greater and greater resiliency in order to succeed in life and pave the path for others.
Hello, my name is Anthony Pham and I am pursuing a B.S in Electrical Engineering. At first, I was hesitant to go to a university since I had no future plans and my major was based on a friend’s. I had plans to attend the local San Jose State University to pursue a B.S. in Management Information System. As the deadline approached, I experienced hard times and increasingly sought a distant university to escape. Researching the accepted colleges, I ultimately decided on UC Davis since Davis offered me the close community aspect I wanted.

Despite my hesitation, I still thought about my interests in the chance that I did attend university. Math and sciences were my strongest subjects, which lines up with engineering. I am currently enrolled in the EE-Emerge course, which is a sophomore and junior electronic systems design class. This class combined practical knowledge and first-hand experience, allowing me to gain more experience as an electrical engineer; this approach made me like my major more.

The Leadership in Engineering Advancement, Diversity and Retention (LEADR) Program offered me the sense of community I wanted. I met kind people who I was not afraid to ask for advice or help from and I bonded with people whom I can call my friends and family. Without LEADR, I would not have made it this far in college. I was able to gain a sense of belonging and I hope that I can do the same for incoming students.
Hi everyone! My name is Arturo Castaneda and I am a 4th year Mechanical Engineer. I am from Richmond, CA which is not too far from UC Davis. Honestly, the reason I chose UC Davis was because of the LEADR program. I knew about UC Davis and its amazing and supportive community, but when I had the opportunity to speak with Tanya, the Director of LEADR, at Decision Day, I knew that UC Davis was the right school for me. She and other individuals from the college created a welcoming vibe for new students. LEADR allowed me to see that there were many students of color who come from diverse backgrounds in the College of Engineering. The program created a home away from home, establishing ever lasting relationships from when I first stepped inside the LEADR Study Center. LEADR is very supportive and cares about your future success. Every single day, advisors converse with students and check in with them to make sure everything is going well. They also provide many resources that set you up for success.

Apart from why I chose Davis, the reason I chose to pursue an engineering degree is because I love to learn about how the world operates, understanding the secrets from Mother Nature, and how we can harness what the world has to offer to create unique technology. I enjoy turning my ideas into reality. Engineering is a challenge, but it pushes you to think outside the box and see things from a different perspective. The skills that you obtain from engineering can also be applied in many situations throughout your everyday life. It has made me a better individual and student as well. Engineering is a blessing in disguise which is another reason why I chose it.

Throughout my time here at UC Davis, I have utilized many resources to create memorable experiences. When I first came to Davis, what really helped my transition was trying out and being a part of the Club Soccer team. I created relationships with amazing people whom I could count on and reach out to whenever I needed any type of support. I also had the opportunity to Study Abroad in Berlin, Germany, focusing my experience on learning a different language, learning about automotives and the industry, travelling, and creating long-lasting relationships. Also, thankfully and gratefully I have an internship this upcoming summer with John Deere. I was able to obtain this internship by attending the SHPE National Convention through CALESS, which is the Chicano and Latino Engineer and Scientist Society.
My Name is Christopher Pribilo and I am a graduating senior in Aerospace Science and Engineering. I am from San Diego, California and I chose UC Davis because of its commitment to academic excellence and the plethora of resources available to students. I also liked the change of scenery from a large urban city to a small rural college town. I chose my major because of my interest in flight and all things aviation. Being an engineer allows me to fulfill my aviation interest while contributing to new technologies that will benefit society.

During my time in Davis, I was able to take on leadership roles and apply fundamental knowledge from the classroom to real world internships. I have also been able to network with many professionals and engage in conversations about innovation within my field. I currently serve on the Black Engineers Association board and I had the opportunity to intern with United Airlines last summer.

The Leadership in Engineering Advancement, Diversity and Retention (LEADR) program has been one of the most influential organizations in my college tenure. The program gave me all the resources that I needed to develop myself professionally and to prepare for a career in engineering. The personalized advising and programming was valuable as a first generation college student and the program has allowed me to reach milestones that I thought were impossible to achieve.
Hello, my name is Martin Vega-Martinez and I am in my fourth year at UC Davis majoring in mechanical engineering. I chose UC Davis because it was the perfect fit for me and it was financially feasible. The campus is welcoming, filled with nature, and the engineering curriculum is one of a kind. I also feel that UC Davis offers unique opportunities that broaden my horizons outside of my field of study. For example, UC Davis is the only UC to offer a program like the UC Davis Fire Department Student Resident Firefighter Program, which has opened up an entirely new career field for me in the future.

I chose to study engineering because it was a perfect mixture of all of the subjects that I enjoyed in high school. The versatility of an engineering degree incorporates physical sciences, mathematics, life sciences, hands-on projects, and an in-depth understanding of the age-old question, “How does it work?”. My area of study has also proven to be one of the hands-on majors in that students get an opportunity to work in the shop or participate in design teams.

I have found community and social/academic support on campus through the Leadership in Engineering Advancement, Diversity and Retention (LEADR) Program. Through LEADR, I have been able to connect with fellow aggies with whom I share similar backgrounds and goals. LEADR has also been a gateway to other on-campus organizations where I have further discovered community and social/academic support. The difference that LEADR has made in my life can not be described in words. The best way I could describe it is by saying that if it were not for LEADR, I do not think I would still be at UC Davis majoring in Mechanical Engineering.
Hello! My name is Andrew Ramirez and I am a current 4th year student studying chemical engineering. I am from a small town called Beaumont in Riverside county. My first introduction to UC Davis was my visit during the Aggie Senior Weekend trip. I absolutely fell in love with the friendliness, compassion, and strong community that Davis cultivated at campus in every single resource I looked for.

As a first-generation college student and child of Mexican immigrants, I found myself interested in multiple engineering fields but still unsure what to pursue. Due to my unfamiliarity with engineering, I decided to choose chemical engineering which gave me the opportunity to dabble in various subjects. This major allowed me to conduct research in diverse fields, from renewable energy to diabetic foot ulcers. I even had the opportunity to work on catalytic converters at the University of Minnesota for a summer internship!

As a result of the lack of mentors I obtained throughout my K-12 education, I was afraid about how I could make the most of my time at college. Through workshops and informative meetings with advisors and my cohort, I learned how to flourish and be self-sufficient at the university level. I would not have known “how to college” if it wasn’t for LEADR. LEADR provided me with the first steps to succeed and boost my confidence. LEADR is my home away from home and they are the support group I can always lean on.
Hello! My name is Naveena Ujagar and I am a LEADR student and a graduating Biomedical Engineer. I am originally from Sacramento, CA and am a first generation college student, as well as the oldest of two younger sisters. I chose to come to UCD because it was close enough to home, yet far enough for me to be independent, and for the extensive research opportunities available here. Besides academics, the city of Davis is beautiful and it is refreshing to be among the greenery and kindness of Davis residents.

Growing up I always gravitated towards science and math, but was especially interested and in awe of human biology, and in high school I became particularly fascinated with physics. It was also in high school when I heard of the field of Biomedical Engineering, and learned that it combined my love for physics and biology to modulate and synthesize the human body. So as college applications came around I decided to major in Biomedical Engineering, and have truly found my calling in the field.

Once I was accepted into UCD, I got a recruitment email from a program called LEADR. I decided to join because they offered resources, support and community especially for first-generation and marginalized communities, which I was seeking out because as the oldest, first-generation sibling I was scared of failing and being unsupported throughout my college career. However, the LEADR program has offered me so much more than I expected. I have made life-long friends here, was provided a safe space to study and stay focused, and received advising from people who truly care about me as a person and as a student.

Overall, LEADR has helped me succeed and thrive in my transition from high school to college, and throughout my college experience. Some other activities that helped my transition and success/learning in college was joining clubs, going to tutoring, conducting research in a lab, asking for help (even outside of academics), and taking part in special Aggie activities (like sporting events, dorm events, picnic day, etc.).
Hello, I am Sarahi Granados and I am a 4th year undergraduate student majoring in Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering. I was born and raised in Riverside, California so coming to UC Davis was a pretty big change for me. Thankfully, I was able to learn about the amazing programs offered on campus that convinced me to attend.

Growing up, I was extremely fascinated with spacecraft and aircraft so, I aimed to pursue a career in the space industry. I knew UC Davis was going to help me achieve my dreams as I learned about its great engineering department and the programs in it. That is exactly what the Leadership in Engineering Advancement, Diversity and Retention (LEADR) Program did. I received individual tutoring for courses I was struggling with, one-on-one advising, connections with alumni who are currently working at NASA and Lockheed Martin, a job as a Safety Monitor for the study space LEADR provides, and most importantly, long-lasting friendships.

Through the LEADR Program, I also received guidance on how to get involved with research and internships. I learned about California Alliance for Minority Participation (CAMP), which gave me funding to conduct research during the summer. LEADR also introduced me to Chicano and Latino Engineers & Scientists Society (CALESS), which taught me how to network and build a strong resume. Through this organization, I was able to receive an internship with Northrop Grumman because of the connections I made.

Overall, my experience at UC Davis has been great and I am extremely thankful for what LEADR has done!
Hello, my name is Tijesuni Oyeyemi. I’m a UC Davis Freshman, a member of the LEADR community and an Electrical Engineering major. I’m from Nigeria, but I immigrated to Sacramento in 2018. I am passionate about solving problems and interested in renewable energy, so I decided to study Electrical Engineering. I aim to pursue entrepreneurship, after graduation.

The decision to come to UC Davis was not easy. For me, it was either here or the University of Michigan. I decided to come here because of the beautiful campus, the warm and friendly atmosphere, and Davis’s proximity to not only California’s capital, Sacramento but also to the global tech capital, “Silicon Valley”.

I deferred my enrollment for the fall and began in Winter Quarter 2020. My transition to college was challenging, but with assistance from the wonderful people at the Center for African Diaspora Student Success (CADSS) and LEADR, I obtained all the advice and information that I needed to get going.

College is what you make it be, and at UC Davis there are lots of ways to get socially involved. I joined an intramural soccer team and the Guitar Club. If you’re passionate about making an impact, there are lots of opportunities for you here. The Student Startup Center holds impactful events and gives you opportunities to bring your ideas to life. I also attended two hack-a-thons in the Winter Quarter: Tree Hacks at Stanford and Hack Davis at UC Davis. So far, I've made new friends, expanded my network and had fun. I think you will too.
Hello, I am Lay Heng Teng and I am currently a 4th year biomedical engineering major that is specializing in cell and tissue engineering. My hometown is Lake Elsinore, California, a small city in Riverside County. I am studying biomedical engineering because my ultimate dream is to protect and increase the quality life of the most vulnerable individuals by engineering new medicines and therapies. I am currently working as an undergraduate researcher in a biomedical engineering lab studying neutrophils, a type of white blood cell. I am also apart of University of California's Leadership Excellence through Advanced Degrees (UC LEADS) program, which is a two-year program that prepares students for scientific research and graduate school.

I first came to visit UC Davis on Decision Day when I was accepted in 2016. I thought the university was beautiful and welcoming. I met Laura and Tanya from the Leadership in Engineering Advancement, Diversity and Retention (LEADR) Program for the first time on Decision Day. They both became part of the reason why I chose to attend UC Davis. As a first generation engineering student that would be the first in her family to leave for university, I knew that I was going to be up for a challenge. I wanted to go where I knew I would be supported every step of the way. I saw how much Laura and Tanya cared about their students, so I knew that I would thrive at UC Davis.
Hi my name is Kevin Phan and I am a second-year Electrical Engineering student here at UC Davis. I am from Stockton, California and I chose UC Davis originally for practical reasons. I wanted to attend somewhere that was near home but not home. This being said, I have really grown to love UC Davis because of the community and students who have created such a friendly and inviting culture. Thus, because of them, I can call Davis my home away from home!

I chose to study engineering because of my mentors and experiences in high school, especially with the program MESA. Working with my hands on STEM projects became my passion and drove me to where I am today! For example, some of my college involvements other than being a LEADR Ambassador, include being IEEE Secretary, a College Ambassador for DigiKey and All About Circuits, and a MESA Student Assistant. All this, however, couldn’t have been achieved without the help I received from the LEADR program.

I was very scared and nervous coming to college and I had many fears about if I could do it, but joining LEADR changed all that and it was the best thing I could have ever done. From the amazing advisors who really care about your education and your well being, to the countless friends I made because of the program, LEADR has given me not only an abundance of resources to support and give me the confidence I need, but a family that has truly helped me get to where I am today.