Paving the Road to Graduate School

By Jennifer McNulty

Michael Eccleston is going to graduate school this fall. A devoted single father, Eccleston earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from UC Santa Cruz in January and was prepared to put off graduate work until his 2-year-old son is older. But psychology professor Aída Hurtado recognized Eccleston’s talent and encouraged him to go to graduate school, and he did.

“I really wanted to go to graduate school, but I didn’t think I could because I felt alienated and isolated by this large private university,” he recalls. “Nothing in my upbringing prepared me to handle the university experience.”

Eccleston relied heavily on input from Hurtado when he designed his first Chicano dramatic literature course in the theater arts department. “This class was very successful,” thanks to Hurtado’s research, says Martinez, a veteran performer and scholar of El Teatro Campesino who sought Coppell’s input regarding which plays and scholarly articles to include in the course. Coppell, meanwhile, is finding her voice as a playwright, embracing the traditions of Teatro Campesino and incorporating Spanish into her works. Yet Coppell describes feeling like an outsider in some classes.

“As a person of color, a lot of times what you say is invalidated because of the ways you choose to communicate it,” she says. “My form of communication is different because of the different experiences I have faced, being a first-generation Mexican immigrant.”

When the theater arts department declined to produce Coppell’s play Strong Women Cry Poetry in part because the world of color in academia.

Martinez affirmed Coppell’s artistic vision and urged her to produce it herself in a different campus venue. “It was hard,” Coppell says of producing Strong Women: a largely autobiographical play that tells the story of Doris, a performance poet in her 20s who immigrated illegally to the United States at the age of 11. Seeing her work performed on stage was “surreal,” recalls Coppell.

“It really is like putting yourself out there,” says Coppell. “It’s a lot of hope. It’s a lot of faith. But Alma told me ‘You learned the secret to theater, which is exposure. It’s a lot of hope. But Alma told me ‘You learned the secret to theater, which is...’”

Those challenging experiences underscore the value of URAP, says Coppell, who also benefited greatly from the support of current program coordinator Ranu Sinha, a doctoral candidate in psychology. “I don’t know if Alma and Ranu realize how much it means to me to have had the kind of guidance they’ve given me,” she says. “I want to continue the cycle.”

Professors are selective about whom they nominate for URAP and tend to choose students who might otherwise fall through the cracks, explains Hurtado.

“Students get overlooked for varied reasons—maybe because they’re quiet, or they don’t know how good they are, or they’re intimidated about talking to their professors,” she says. The good news is that URAP provides the individual attention that builds confidence and breeds success—and changes the face of higher education.

“Getting Latino students here is only half the job,” says Martinez. “Keeping them here and offering them an education that reflects the diversity of the state is a big challenge. URAP is a positive force in the transformation of the academy, and it can be a catalyst for even greater social change.”

Eccleston and Hurtado celebrate the conclusion of his undergraduate years.