

Paving the Road to Graduate School



Michael Eccleston meets with faculty mentor Aída Hurtado in UCSC's Chicano/Latino Research Center.

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, pointing out the advantages of starting his Ph.D. while his little boy is in preschool.

"I really wanted to go to graduate school, but I didn't think I could be-

cause of my commitment to my son," recalls Eccleston, who shares custody with his son's mother, who lives 80 miles away. "Talking with Aída, I realized I could do it because I'll be in a position to relocate when he starts kindergarten. I'll be done with course work at that point."

In one frenzied week, Eccleston wrote a statement of purpose, took the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), and applied to UCSC's doctoral program in social psychology. Eccleston aced the exams, was accepted, and received a generous fellowship to enroll this fall.

That conversation with Hurtado opened up a world of possibilities for Eccleston, and exchanges like it are happening more often at UC Santa Cruz as a result of the Chicano/Latino Research Center's Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program (URAP).

Under Hurtado's direction, URAP pairs undergraduates with faculty mentors who encourage students to "think beyond the B.A." The program gives participants an insider's view of academic life with the aim of diversifying the next generation of professors.

Nominated by professors, students gain valuable research experience work-

ing several hours a week as paid assistants to their faculty mentor. They participate in skill-building workshops on topics like library research and applying to graduate school, and many attend academic conferences and professional meetings with their mentors. Professors receive small stipends, and a current Ph.D. student coordinates the program and serves as an influential role model.

Established in 2000 to help open the academic "pipeline" to Latinos, URAP is available to students interested in careers in cross-border studies of the Americas. It is "suggested and recommended but not required" that students come from underrepresented backgrounds, says Hurtado.

A small program, URAP has served only 67 students so far, and 13 are pursuing advanced degrees. The program also appears to have a profound impact on undergraduate success: URAP participants have a 100 percent graduation rate, compared to about 65 percent of Latino students campus-wide. "An unintended consequence of the contact with faculty and the coordinator is graduation," says Hurtado. "Whatever hurdles students are facing, they come talk with us."

Fernanda Coppel says URAP has been a lifeline as she's struggled to find her place in higher education. Coppel says she "didn't feel smart enough to go to college," but a cousin urged her to apply, and URAP has sustained her.

"No one in my family has gone to graduate school," says Coppel, who was born in Mexico. A junior majoring in literature with a minor in theater arts, Coppel has embraced URAP's goal of earning a Ph.D. "I really see the need for people of color in academia."

Alma Martínez is Coppel's mentor. An associate professor of theater arts who specializes in Chicano and Latin American theater, Martínez says URAP would've made a "world of difference" to her as an undergraduate at the University of Southern California. "I enrolled straight out of high school with

a full scholarship, but I dropped out because I felt alienated and isolated by this large private university," she recalls. "Nothing in my upbringing prepared me to handle the university experience."

Martínez relied heavily on input from Coppel when she designed the first Chicano dramatic literature course in the Theater Arts Department. "The class was very successful, thanks to Fernanda's research," says Martínez, a veteran performer and scholar of El Teatro Campesino who sought Coppel's input regarding which plays and scholarly articles to include in the course.

Coppel, meanwhile, is finding her voice as a playwright, embracing the traditions of Teatro Campesino and incorporating Spanish into her works. Yet Coppel 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 Coppel's play *Strong Women Cry Poetry* in part because it was "too culturally specific for their season," Martínez affirmed Coppel's artistic vision and urged her to produce it herself in a different campus venue.

"It was hard," Coppel says of producing *Strong Women*, a largely autobiographical play that tells the story of Dora, 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 Coppel.

"It really is like putting yourself out there," says Coppel. "It's a lot of hope. It's a lot of faith. But Alma told me 'You learned the secret to theater, which is producing your own work.' It's a blessing that I've had to struggle. It builds character."

Those challenging experiences underscore the value of URAP, says Coppel, who also benefited greatly from the support of current program coordina-

tor 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 Martínez. "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.

