UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 2, 2021

Nora Drake

Standout Student

When Ebelechukwu Eseka started college at UC Santa Barbara, she wanted nothing more than to blend in. Fast forward four years, and she cannot help but stand out for her impressive academic and extracurricular achievements. Now she will share her story in a virtual address Saturday, June 12, as the 2021 commencement student speaker for the College of Letters & Science.

Eseka, who is completing a bachelor's degree in sociology, is of Nigerian and Ghanaian descent. She emigrated to the United States when she was 14. Though she was a top student at A.B. Miller High School in Fontana, she describes feeling unprepared for the college admissions process, and says she ultimately chose schools to apply to "at random."

Today Eseka feels grateful that she landed at UCSB, where, as a Promise Scholar, she had access to resources and mentors who helped her come into her own.

"I was a little — no, a lot — intimidated when I came into college," Eseka said. "It felt similar to when I first came to the United States and I started to retreat into myself. I felt all of the same feelings of insecurity I did in high school. I was lucky to be in the Promise Scholar program, because it made my transition so much easier."

In her remarks, Eseka will aim to connect her own experiences with universal themes. "I went through a period where I didn't want to feel like 'the other,' but now I walk into a room and I want everyone to know where I am from," she said. "I want to tell that story, but I want to relate it back to the public. I think a lot of people can

relate to my immigrant story, because almost everyone has dealt with some sort of identity crisis, and imposter syndrome."

Eseka says that if her speech has one major piece of advice for graduates, it is to roll with life's punches. "When you have a plan, and life doesn't go according to your plan, it shakes things up and you can feel like everything is lost," she said. "Setbacks and redirections happen for a reason. During the pandemic, everything feels uncertain but I want everyone to know that things may seem rocky, but they are going to end up working out."

Things certainly seem to be working out for Eseka. In addition to her selection as commencement speaker, she has received both the Deans' Award for Outstanding Senior (which recognizes extraordinary scholarship in the College of Letters & Science) and the Thomas More Storke Award, UCSB's highest student honor. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career as a public interest attorney.

Now that she is comfortable standing out, Eseka is taking time to appreciate every achievement. "I'm proud of myself," she said. "I'm excited. This is a big moment, and I hope people like my speech."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.