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First-generation graduate Anabel Rocha Ambrosio builds a better life with education as the foundation

In early January of 2004, Anabel Rocha Ambrosio moved to the U.S. with her parents and both sets of grandparents. She was two-and-a-half years old at the time, and has no memory of her first home in Tijuana, Mexico. Like many immigrants, the family was seeking a better life, especially for young Anabel.

The first several years in her new country were difficult, Rocha Ambrosio remembered. She struggled to communicate in English, and early on was often pulled from class to receive extra help so she wouldn't fall behind. After school sometimes she'd get on her neighbor's computer to look up word definitions and learn new phrases.

"My mom instilled that value in me — the importance of education," Rocha Ambrosio said. "She had that immigrant mindset of bringing your child to a new country to get the best possible education. I grew up knowing I had to go to college."

The first in her family to attend college, Rocha Ambrosio is graduating from UC Santa Barbara with a double major in feminist studies and linguistics and a minor in poverty, inequality and social justice. She's a recipient of this year's University Service Award, honoring her academic success and involvement across campus during the past four years.

A math whiz, musician and member of her high school's debate team and honor roll, Rocha Ambrosio first visited UCSB as part of an early academic outreach program in eleventh grade. "It was so pretty here and the people were nice," she said. UCSB became her first pick.

She knew her family didn't have the resources to send her to college; it would be up to her to figure it out. Scouring the internet, she discovered a range of scholarships based on academic performance, housing needs and musicianship, among other opportunities. "I started applying like crazy," she said.

Right around the time she got the good news from UCSB, she won several scholarships. All that paperwork and essay-writing had paid off.

"Somehow I made it in, and I got enough money for a full ride," she said. "Everything lined up in the best way possible."

Part of the support came from UCSB's [Promise Scholars](#) program, which provided financial help as well as mentorships, workshops and other resources. She would also land a summer job with the program, in 2022, helping first-year students stay on track and supervising fellow scholars as they mentored nearly three dozen new arrivals.

"I want to really highlight how incredible the Promise Scholars program has been to me during my time as an undergraduate," she added. "Aside from the financial support, it is a lovely community and we have the incredible (program director) Holly Roose to support us. She has been there for me from the very beginning and continues to be someone I can go to."

Roose praised Rocha Ambrosio's drive and compassion to translate healthcare information for immigrant farmworkers and as a volunteer community advocate for rent stabilization.

Living at home in Bakersfield during early waves of the pandemic, Rocha Ambrosio in the fall of 2020 canvassed for Eric Arias — a UCSB alum — during his successful city council campaign; the following spring, she worked in his office fielding calls from constituents.

Back on campus, she also received support from Undocumented Student Services (USS), a program for undocumented and refugee students and those from families

with mixed-migration status. At USS, she was mentored by Malaphone Phommasa, an academic advisor and fellow first-generation college graduate. With Phommasa's guidance, Rocha Ambrosio co-founded the Tri-Alpha National Honors Society for first-generation students.

"This club has been really special to me because I have had the opportunity to hear from other first-generation faculty, such as Vanessa Woods and Yasmine Domingues-Whitehead," she said. "Listening to their stories has been incredibly helpful throughout my undergraduate years because I am able to see how successful they are and it inspires me to continue working hard."

Shortly after moving to the U.S. with her family, Rocha Ambrosio became an undocumented immigrant when her travel visa expired. Since then, the threat of deportation — to a country she has no memory of — has created a background noise of anxiety throughout much of her life.

Fortunately, some of that stress was alleviated about six years ago when her parents saved up to hire a lawyer to prepare her application to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, a federal immigration policy that allows her to stay in the U.S. because she arrived as a child. Her DACA status of deferred deportation is renewable every two years provided she stays out of legal trouble and continues to work or go to school.

With her university diploma in hand, Rocha Ambrosio is planning to find a job and take an academic gap year. She recently got accepted — again with a full ride — to UCSB's intensive Teacher Education Program, where graduate students earn a teaching credential and masters degree in one year.

"I can always apply again next year," she said. "I am interested in going into K-12 education, and I have a passion for helping students get into college."

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About UC Santa Barbara

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