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Opening doors: Cuca Acosta’s journey from Santa Barbara High to college admissions leadership

It’s a rainy February evening and a group of high school sophomores and juniors, along with their parents, have braved the weather to begin the college admission process. Seated in the cafeteria of Santa Barbara High School, they listen as guidance counselors and advisors introduce them to admission requirements, financial aid basics and the array of higher education options now opening up to them.

Also in the audience, and waiting for her turn to speak, is Cuca Acosta, UC Santa Barbara’s associate director of admissions, herself a graduate of Santa Barbara High before matriculating to UCSB in 1997.

Once she has the mic, Acosta is direct, practiced and enthusiastic. She describes the kinds of students who thrive in a University of California environment and which factors — academic and extracurricular — are considered in an admissions decision. And then she smiles, adding a gentle reminder that it’s a key time for them.

“Your GPA is going to come from sophomore and junior year. That’s right now — so no pressure.”

A Santa Barbara native, the first in her family to go to college, a tour guide during her UCSB days, and a 20-plus-year veteran of UCSB's admissions office, Acosta is an expert in her field. She's also deeply aware of her ability to serve as a model for others, and credits her mother for helping point her toward higher education.

"My mom was adamant that college was the open door for success, whatever success looked like to me," she said.

A philosophy major, Acosta didn't set out to work in college admissions. But she got involved in early outreach right after graduation, and other than a short stint at Santa Barbara City College, she has practiced her craft at UCSB, including hundreds of visits to schools throughout the state, evangelizing the power of a college degree. While her human connection skills are evident, she's also responsible for a wide array of strategies to inform and attract undergraduates and transfer students, increasingly relying on digital communications.

As demanding as that work is, she says she never turns down the opportunity to spread the word at a high school — or even a junior high — presentation on college options.

"Some people don't have choices and some people don't get a lot of opportunities. But I think that higher education is access to those choices and access to those opportunities," she said. "And it doesn't matter if you're from a low-income family or well-off, taking advantage of education and resources means that you can change your family's history; you can change your history."

Her own history includes a deep connection to her Hispanic heritage. From her tour guide days, right up to the one-on-ones with parents in the Santa Barbara High cafeteria, she makes her message personal:

"I want people to see first generation, single parent household, local and my cultural identity…and just say, 'If she can do it, can I?'"

Acosta is a "hometown hero" for her admissions outreach, said Lisa Przekop, UCSB executive director of admissions. She also emphasized the deep and broad impact of her work.

“Cuca manages a national effort to promote UCSB,” she said. ”She leads a large team of admission counselors working at the high school and community college level with students, parents and counselors. She has a global network of counselors who know her from conference presentations, webinars and personal visits.”

And her personal qualities, including compassion, tenacity and creativity, are always on display, Przekop adds.

The admissions process, Acosta acknowledges, has become more complex and stressful in the years since she began her career. Her approach? “My goal is to work with my team to make sure that we’re putting resources out there for students so they can submit an application that clearly expresses their goals and aspirations within the context of their accomplishments. We want students to stop comparing themselves to each other. That’s how we try to de-stress the situation.”

There are stresses on both sides. For the past two years, UCSB has received more than 110,000 applications for freshman spots and has had room for only about a quarter of those students. In 2015, by contrast, 70,000 prospective students applied to UCSB’s freshman class.

“Let's be real,” said Acosta. “The University of California as a system is known around the globe, and Santa Barbara is this gorgeous gem.”

Professor of sociology Victor Rios described Acosta as an integral part of that gem, both for students and the larger community.

“In my decade of knowing her, I have seen her mentor students, help staff move up in the ranks and support faculty in their work with students… she teaches us all what it means to be a UCSB colleague,” he said.

Przekop agreed, noting that in addition to her admissions work, Acosta has served on the Alumni Board of Directors and on several boards and professional organizations supporting students, parents and counselors. She is currently co-chairing the search committee for UCSB’s first Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI) director and is co-chair of Strengthening Opportunities for Latinx (SOL) which serves Chicano/Latino faculty and staff.

For Acosta, the challenges and rewards of her work on so many fronts are both rewarding and all-encompassing. She calls the university “a big part of my identity.”

Still, she says it’s the students who inspire her most.

“If you ever sit down in a student research symposium and hear about some of the work that undergrad students are doing, or sit in one of my tour guide meetings and they tell you what they did this week, you’re like, ‘Oh, my faith in humanity is restored!,” said Acosta. “It’s just great knowing that you are a little piece of that.”

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About UC Santa Barbara

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