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UCSB math graduate charts his next move

For Daniel Naylor, graduating with a degree in mathematics from UC Santa Barbara's College of Creative Studies marks more than just the end of an undergraduate chapter — it's a celebration of hard-won growth, self-discovery and a deepening love for numbers that tell real-world stories.

"To put it simply, I really like math," said Naylor, who grew up in Santa Clarita, California. "It's a field that gives me the most fulfillment when I finally understand its concepts." But it wasn't until junior year that he found his true calling — statistics. "What especially excites me about statistics is that it feels like math with an impact. I get to do cool math and use my results to inform important decisions."

That revelation came in part thanks to PSTAT 215A, a graduate course in Bayesian statistics taught by Alexander Franks, an associate professor in the Department of Statistics and Applied Probability. The class left a deep impression. "After I took his class, I realized that statistics is where I belong," Naylor said. "It's what encouraged me to pursue the field deeper." That summer, he joined Franks for a research project that cemented his passion. "I learned immensely and enjoyed the whole experience."

But the path wasn't always smooth.

“Math is hard, brutal and absolutely unforgiving,” he recalled. “Witnessing my peers quickly answer problems that took me hours to even understand defined my freshman year.” In time, Naylor discovered his own approach. “I realized that I didn’t need to be at the top,” he said, “but rather just go at my own pace and focus on the things I care about. After all, what good is school if I’m not here to learn?”

Community played a big part in that growth. Naylor was an active member of the Data Science Club throughout his time at UCSB, stepping into leadership roles during his junior and senior years as director of technical development and then internal vice president. “The most rewarding part of both roles was not only supporting members with their projects, but also testing my own knowledge and understanding of data science and statistics,” he said. “It was very hard, but very rewarding. The club was paramount in my development as a statistician.”

His advice to new students? “Get involved. Get outside your comfort zone. Zero tolerance policy of excuses! I would never say ‘No’ unless I had a very, very good reason. Not everything I got involved with was going to become a major commitment down the line, but in doing so I found my people and communities.”

Naylor also made time for fun. “I always enjoyed volunteering for the yearly concerts, such as Delirium and Extravaganza,” he said. “I got to shake Denzel Curry’s hand and take a picture with him! You are never gonna get that anywhere else!”

Looking ahead, Naylor is headed to UC Irvine to pursue a Ph.D. in statistics. While he’s still exploring his long-term goals, he’s open to academia or industry — and is taking it all in stride. “College has given me invaluable knowledge and life experiences,” he said. “Maybe life isn’t as scary as I thought it would be. Then again, I’m not sure what to expect these next few years! But why let that drag me down?”

His final words of wisdom for fellow graduates: “Never, under any circumstances, compare your average life to someone else’s highlights. The worst thing you can do is look at someone else and ask yourself, ‘How can I be more like them?’ You should be asking yourself, ‘How can I be more like me?’”

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