



*University
of California*

How to
**GET IN AND
THRIVE**
at the University of California

**LESSONS AND ADVICE FROM POLYGENCE ALUMNI
CURRENTLY ATTENDING UC SCHOOLS**

POLYGENCE.ORG

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POLYGENCE ALUMNI & THE UC'S

Since 2019, Polygence alumni have received 1,300 acceptance letters from the UCs. But what's really special isn't how many get in—it's everything they achieve when they get there.

I already knew how to write literature reviews, build hypotheses, and ask meaningful questions.

As admissions to top public universities grow increasingly competitive, students who stand out must do more than check boxes—they must show evidence of deep thinking, intellectual curiosity, and a genuine passion for learning. That's exactly what students from Polygence are doing—and it's paying off. In the Class of 2025, Polygence alumni saw remarkable acceptance rates into top University of California campuses, boasting a 33.5% acceptance rate at UCLA, 34.1% at UC Berkeley, and 53.1% at UC San Diego—more than doubling or even tripling the average acceptance odds at each school.

But the Polygence advantage doesn't end at the admissions letter. Alumni of the program consistently report that their experience conducting independent research alongside PhD-level mentors gave them a powerful head start once they arrived on campus. With experience framing original research questions, engaging in critical reading and writing at the college level, and working through academic setbacks, these students often feel more confident in seminar discussions and more prepared to compete for research assistant roles in university labs. "My Polygence project helped me land a spot in a molecular biology lab my first semester at Berkeley," shared one student. "I already knew how to write literature reviews, build hypotheses, and ask meaningful questions."

So what accounts for the remarkable success of Polygence alumni? Beyond the program's rigorous academic structure, it's the mindset that Polygence nurtures: perseverance in the face of intellectual challenge, sustained curiosity, and the drive to push beyond the high school curriculum. These students aren't just preparing for college—they're already doing the work. As their record at UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego and the other UCs show, admissions offices and faculty alike are taking notice.

Top 5 Must-Have

SKILLS & MINDSETS FOR SUCCESS AT A UC

We asked Polygence alumni now studying across the University of California system to reflect on their college experience—what’s challenged them, what’s helped them succeed, and how their time at Polygence prepared them for it all. Drawing from survey data and personal stories, we’ve compiled the top 5 skills and mindsets that UC students say are essential for success. Whether you’re aiming for Berkeley, UCLA, UCSD, or another campus, these insights offer a candid look at what it really takes to thrive.

01 CRITICAL READING & WRITING SKILLS

Success in college requires more than just completing assignments—it demands the ability to carefully analyze academic texts, synthesize complex ideas, and communicate them clearly in writing. Polygence alumni credit their research experience with strengthening these skills, giving them confidence to tackle challenging papers and write compelling essays.

“I learned how to develop a compelling research question, synthesize complex sources, and present my findings with clarity and confidence. These skills have helped me tremendously in college, especially in writing-intensive courses.” —Ethan, Berkeley

02 INDEPENDENT LEARNING & GOAL SETTING

College demands that students take initiative, set their own pace, and follow through without constant oversight—skills Polygence alumni say they honed through their research experience. By learning to break big projects into manageable steps and stay accountable, they built habits that translated seamlessly into college life.

03 ACADEMIC CONFIDENCE & RESEARCH READINESS

Many Polygence alumni entered college with a strong head start in research and academic writing, giving them the confidence to take on college-level work from day one. Their experience navigating complex topics and producing original work made them feel prepared for everything from essays to lab work.

04 GROWTH MINDSET & INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

Polygence alumni credit their research experience with sparking a deeper love of learning and a willingness to embrace challenges and uncertainty. By exploring topics they were genuinely curious about, they built the confidence to ask hard questions and grow through trial and error.

05 COMMUNICATION & RELATIONSHIP- BUILDING SKILLS

Strong communication—both written and verbal—is key to success in college, from class discussions to connecting with professors. Polygence alumni shared that working closely with mentors helped them become more confident expressing ideas, asking questions and building academic relationships.

Application tips

FOR UC SCHOOLS

Applying to the University of California (UC) is a competitive and often daunting process, but students who have successfully made it there agree on one key piece of advice: lead with passion. Whether it's a creative project, a deep dive into a technical subject, or a personal connection to a scientific challenge, the "spike" matters. As one student put it, "You want to show a spike, something you're passionate about or really good at. Writing a research paper can help show that passion." Admissions readers are looking for more than a list of achievements. They want to see how students think, what drives them, and how they engage deeply with their interests.

"Your project doesn't have to just be a line in the extracurricular section. It can show what you're passionate about and what you want to do in college." —Davina, UC Berkeley

For many, conducting research through programs like Polygence was not only a meaningful intellectual pursuit but also a strategic way to stand out in their applications. One student who researched computer vision and machine learning used his project in a UC Personal Insight Question focused on creativity. "Polygence allowed me to think creatively about different ways to approach a problem," he shared. Another student, who wrote a literature review on skin organoids, echoed the importance of demonstrating follow-through: "Writing a research paper with a mentor is great to show your dedication."

These kinds of projects gave them tangible accomplishments to discuss in essays, and in some cases, strong letters of recommendation from mentors as well. By investing time in research, students were able to show not just their academic curiosity but also their ability to explore a topic in depth and communicate its significance to others.

That ability to connect your story is another piece of advice UC students consistently emphasize. One student shared how their mentor helped them weave together seemingly unrelated interests in art and STEM. "They showed me how to connect those interests and write about how my art experiences developed into my STEM interests." Whether through narrative or resume, the goal is to clearly communicate not just what you've done but why it matters to you and how it shapes your future goals. It's not about checking boxes; it's about crafting a compelling and cohesive personal story.

Once you're in, the same drive and curiosity that got you there will help you succeed. UC students stress the importance of being open-minded, ambitious, and resilient. "Be hard-working and keep going, even when things are tough," one student advised. Another added, "There are so many events and opportunities that it can be overwhelming, but if you're open to trying new classes and clubs, you'll surprise yourself and find new passions." The message is clear: getting into a UC starts with showing who you are. Once you're there, growth comes from continuing to follow what excites you most.



UC Berkeley

Right in the heart of the Bay Area, UC Berkeley is a place where ideas grow. From the busy city to the hills nearby, it's easy to see why so many students dream of studying here. As a renowned "Public Ivy," UC Berkeley offers a world-class education that's accessible to students from all backgrounds. The campus is known for its strong STEM programs and groundbreaking research, with numerous Nobel laureates among its faculty and alumni. You would be joining a tradition that includes people like Steve Wozniak, who helped start Apple, and Jennifer Doudna, who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2020.

UC Berkeley is more than just a place to study. It is a community where students can grow, make friends, and enjoy a vibrant campus life. With one of the largest academic libraries in the country and over 30 other libraries on campus, there is always something new to explore.

Most popular majors

- Computer Science
- Business Administration
- Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences (EECS)
- Biology
- Economics
- Political Science

General Info

- Year founded: 1868
- Number of students: 45,000
- Student to staff ratio: 19:1
- Acceptance rate: 11%
- Graduation rate: 92%
- Majors: 150+

DAVINA YAHAR

Passion Meets Purpose: How Creative Roots Sparked an Interest in Economics

Davina is a sophomore at UC Berkeley majoring in Economics. She is passionate about integrating creativity and mental health, as reflected in her Polygence project where she created an art-based mental health coloring book for kids. Inspired by her interest in the social side of psychology and business, she chose to study economics to explore the intersection of these areas.

Before she ever stepped foot on the UC Berkeley campus, Davina had already created something meaningful—a research-backed, art-based coloring book designed to help children better understand their emotions. “I had always used art as a therapeutic tool for my own mental health, and I wanted to share that with others,” she said. With the help of her Polygence mentor, a PhD student in psychology, Davina sifted through academic research and tested her tool with her younger sister. That project not only gave her a platform to express her creativity but also helped her “communicate with adults in college” and build the confidence to navigate more complex academic spaces.

Now a student at Berkeley majoring in economics, Davina continues to explore the intersection of creativity, business, and mental health. “In the classroom, I love how economics here is a mix of math, business, and psychology,” she shared. Outside of class, she’s deeply involved in student life, writing for the Berkeley Economic Review and working on a startup solution for mental health through the university’s Challenge Lab. Her advice to future Berkeley applicants? “Convey your passion through a story. Your project doesn’t have to just be a line in the extracurricular section. It can show what you’re passionate about and what you want to do in college.” For those navigating campus life, she urges openness: “You’ll surprise yourself and find new passions. Two years ago, I was a different person than I am now, and I’m very proud of who I’ve become here at Berkeley.”



ETHAN KOU

Pioneering Perception: A Journey into Computer Vision and EECS at Berkeley

Ethan is a first-year student studying Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) at UC Berkeley. He's passionate about robotics, machine learning, and computer vision. He is currently a Computer Vision Engineer intern at Matterport. His Polygence project focused on improving perception robustness in bad weather for self-driving cars, which helped kickstart his interest in computer vision.

Ethan's deep dive into machine learning and computer vision began with a question: how can self-driving cars see better in bad weather? His curiosity led him to Polygence, where he tackled the challenge of perception robustness and later published a research paper. "That project really sparked my interest in machine learning and computer vision," Ethan said. Encouraged by his progress, he pursued a second project to push his skills further. With the support of mentors Akshi and Noah, he not only built a strong technical foundation but also learned how to read academic papers and stay current in a fast-moving field. "I chose Polygence because I got paired with a mentor, which was a big help," he added. Those early experiences taught him how to ask meaningful questions, navigate complexity, and work through problems independently—skills that set him apart in college applications and continue to serve him well on campus.

At UC Berkeley, Ethan has brought that same mindset to both coursework and extracurriculars. "The classes cover topics I wanted to learn in high school but never had the chance to study," he said. Beyond academics, he's joined clubs filled with driven peers and landed a Computer Vision Engineer internship at Matterport. The research experience from Polygence prepared him for the demands of his lab work, particularly the emphasis on reading and writing scientific papers. His advice for high schoolers? "If you're really interested in a topic that isn't taught at your school, research is a great way to dive deep into that subject." And for those hoping to succeed at Berkeley, he emphasized persistence and initiative: "Be hard-working and keep going, even when things are tough... You have to be ambitious and look for opportunities—they won't just come to you."



RACHAEL TIONG

Bridging Early Research with College Success

Rachael is a sophomore at UC Berkeley majoring in Molecular and Cellular Biology. In high school, she completed a Polygence project on skin organoids and their potential in treating skin cancer. The experience gave her a strong foundation in research and scientific writing. Now at Berkeley, she's thriving in labs and inspired by the collaborative, driven campus community.

As a student at UC Berkeley studying cell biology, Rachael traces her early research experience back to a deeply personal motivation—her grandfather's battle with skin cancer. Through Polygence, she explored the potential of skin organoids to address cancer-related skin damage. "Using skin organoids can help address similar issues," she explained. Over four to five months, she worked one-on-one with a UCLA-based mentor to produce a ten-page literature review that included detailed diagrams, methodology, and results. "When you're passionate about something, it's enjoyable, so it wasn't a hassle," she said. The project didn't just earn her a paper she's now submitting for publication, it also gave her a foundation in research that she's continued to build on at Berkeley.

That early exposure to academic writing and scientific inquiry has already paid dividends in college. "In my labs here, I was surprised to see that we had to create methods, research, and results sections just like in Polygence," she shared. "That gave me a head start, and I was even able to help others in my lab." Beyond the classroom, she's embraced campus life, from watching the famously bold squirrels roam near the clock tower to absorbing the traditions that surround UC Berkeley's quirky culture. Her advice for future applicants? Show your passion through action. "Writing a research paper with a mentor is great to show your dedication," she said. "You want to show a spike—something you're passionate about or really good at."





UC Davis



Located in Northern California's farmland, UC Davis feels like a friendly community. Founded in 1905 as an extension of UC Berkeley, it is one of the largest UC campuses and is known for its programs in environmental science, veterinary medicine, and engineering. The university also offers opportunities in technology and innovation, making it a great choice for students who want a welcoming college town with strong academic programs. Notable alumni include Ann Veneman, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, and NASA astronaut Tracy Caldwell Dyson, both of whom show the impact Davis graduates can make in the world.

From farmers markets to bike paths, UC Davis feels like home. Known as the "Bicycle Capital of the United States," the campus has over 100 miles of bike lanes, and most students commute by bike. With a strong community and a focus on student well-being, it is a place where students can thrive both in and out of the classroom.

Most popular majors

- Animal Science
- Biological Sciences
- Psychology
- Managerial Economics
- Computer Science
- Environmental Science and Policy

General Info

- Year founded: 1905
- Number of students: 39,000
- Student to staff ratio: 20:1
- Acceptance rate: 37%
- Graduation rate: 85%
- Majors: 100+

NOORA MATHUR

From the Heart: A Path to Purpose Through Research

Noora Mathur is a Genetics and Genomics major at UC Davis with a minor in Public Health Sciences. She is passionate about cardiovascular research and pediatric cardiology.

At the intersection of science and service, Noora Mathur is building a future shaped by purpose. A Genetics and Genomics major with a minor in Public Health Sciences at UC Davis, Noora has long been driven by a passion for cardiovascular research—one that’s deeply personal. “My project was about congenital heart defects and the causes of them,” she shared of her Polygence research experience. “This project was really close to me because I have a congenital heart defect.” That personal connection fueled a literature review that didn’t just prepare her for college-level research, it solidified her career direction.

Now thriving at UC Davis, Noora is an undergraduate research assistant studying gene expression and cell signaling pathways, while also working with a student-run clinic and preparing to present at a campus-wide research conference. Her early experience with Polygence gave her a crucial head start. “It taught me a lot of valuable skills in scientific writing, which is very different from English class writing,” she said. “Now, I’m working on similar reports in my clinic.”

Noora also returned to Polygence as a research coach, mentoring high school students and creating content to demystify research for the next generation of scholars.

Despite a demanding academic schedule, Noora has made room for joy and connection. From performing on an Indian dance team to exploring the campus craft center, she’s learned the importance of balance. “It can get overwhelming, especially that first year,” she admitted. “So I picked one career activity and one fun activity to focus on.” Her advice to incoming students? Stay open. “There are so many opportunities here. If you put in the effort and stay focused, you’ll find a community that supports your goals, and your hobbies.”



Let's Chat With

MEKEK ANAND

Finding My Path in Neuroscience: Mehek Anand on Research, Resilience, and Life at UC Davis

Can you tell us about your Polygence project?

I did Polygence when I was a sophomore in high school. My project focused on studying the effects of drug addiction in the brain. I knew I wanted to do something with neuroscience because that was an area I was interested in, and I got paired with my mentor, Andrew. He gave me papers to read and helped me learn about the area. We started broadly with neuroscience and then focused on drug addiction. I wrote a scientific literature review paper with his help, and that was the outcome of the project.

What brought you to UC Davis?

That is the number one question I've gotten from everyone I've met here. When I got in and toured the school during my spring break, I felt like everything I saw aligned with what I was looking for in a college experience, both academically and socially. Davis is a great STEM school, and when I came here, I felt like I really liked this place and could see myself growing into the student and the person I wanted to become over the four years of my college experience.

What has been your favorite thing about studying here?

My favorite thing is how big the school is, how much they have to offer to their students, and how much support they give.

Q&A



What has your first-year experience been like?

My first year experience has been really great. I've settled in well and quickly felt like I became a part of the UC Davis community. Even though it's a large school, I've found my own community in my friends and classmates. The community is very supportive, and I've just been having a lot of fun.

What skills are important for success at UC Davis?

One really important skill is knowing what you are looking to get out of your experience here, so you can make use of the resources in the most effective way—whether that's academically, socially, or career-wise. Knowing what you want makes up half the effort in reaching your goals. Other important skills include being self-directed, motivated, and having an idea of what you might want, along with the drive, motivation, and work ethic to get there.



UC Los Angeles

UCLA is the only world-class research university established in the 20th century, and it continues to inspire students from all backgrounds. Located in the vibrant city of Los Angeles, UCLA is known for its energetic atmosphere and beautiful campus, often called a “College in a Garden.” Founded in 1919, UCLA stands out for its strong programs in the arts, sciences, engineering, and health sciences. The university also receives more college applications than any other university in the world, highlighting its global reputation. Notable alumni include Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Boyer and basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, demonstrating how UCLA graduates excel in many different fields.

Despite being the second smallest UC campus, its location in the heart of a bustling city keeps it buzzing with energy. Students enjoy easy access to arts, entertainment, and global industries. With over 1,000 student clubs and a vibrant cultural scene, UCLA is a place where students can thrive both academically and socially.

Most popular majors

- Psychology
- Business Economics
- Political Science
- Biology
- Computer Science
- Sociology

General Info

- Year founded: 1919
- Number of students: 47,000
- Student to staff ratio: 18:1
- Acceptance rate: 9%
- Graduation rate: 92%
- Majors: 125+

SONYA SURAPANENI

Finding Her Path: From Pre-Med to Product Design at UCLA

Sonya is a second-year Cognitive Science major at UCLA with a specialization in computing. After starting pre-med, she discovered her passion for technology and design. Now she's exploring how design and tech intersect as a product design intern at the LEGO Group.

A pre-med pivot to product design might sound surprising, but for Sonya, it was a natural evolution of her interests. She explored how the college application process affects students' stress and anxiety through a Polygence project, especially among Asian students who face more pressure from their parents. That experience helped her build research and writing skills that she still uses in college. She has also been active in LA Blueprint, where she works on apps for social good, and she completed a design program at the Silicon Valley School of Design. Now, she's interning at the LEGO Group, where she's applying what she's learned in college and building a foundation for her future career.

"One of the biggest changes from high school to college is having to motivate yourself day-to-day." Sonya shares that in high school, there was always a clear goal like preparing for college, and parents were there to push and support you, but in college there isn't always a clear end goal, and you have to keep yourself accountable for going to class, doing homework, and making time for friends.



She emphasizes that skills like advocating for yourself and asking questions are important, especially at a big school where lecture halls can feel intimidating. "Coming from a small high school, I was intimidated by lecture halls with 500 people," she admits. But learning to go to office hours and talk to your TA is really important. She also recommends avoiding procrastination because people with good work habits in high school tend to do better in college. Understanding how you learn is helpful, whether you should take notes during lectures or just listen.

Writing skills are also important, even in a major like Cognitive Science, because writing comes up in classes, internships, and jobs. She highlights that having good stats knowledge is also valuable; she's taken four or five stats-heavy classes, and AP Stats helped with that. Her experience with Polygence taught her to take initiative and build research and writing skills she now uses in classes and internships.

Let's Chat With

VALERIE KUO

From Polygence to UCLA: A Journey into Psychology and Research

"Polygence let me dip my toes into research, and it inspired me to keep exploring psychology at UCLA."

Can you tell us about your Polygence project?

My Polygence project was writing a literature review. I decided to explore CBT, which is cognitive behavioral therapy, and drugs and their effects on anxiety and depression. This was my first time doing any sort of research, and I had no idea what a literature review was. Polygence allowed me to dip my toes into it. Now, I'm doing a lab at UCLA also on depression, stress, and inflammation of the brain. Doing the literature review project in high school inspired me to do more in psychology, and it led me to where I am now.

Why did you choose UCLA?

I chose UCLA because it's such a top research facility. There are so many labs to choose from and professors to look up to. I wanted to go to a school where I could also participate in research, and UCLA was great for me in that aspect. Additionally, it's a school filled with aspiring and motivated students, and I wanted to be in an environment where I could also be inspired by them. I love the environment, my friends, and all the classmates I meet every day. I think it's a great environment, and the opportunities that UCLA has to offer are limitless.

What's one thing first-year students should work on before coming to college?

I think one thing that first-year students should work on before coming to college is really knowing how to small talk. Since UCLA is such a huge campus and you're constantly meeting people every day, I had to strengthen my small talk skills and learn how to keep a conversation flowing. I think that's a really important skill to have in university and even in your future career.

What's a challenge that first-year students might face that people don't often talk about?

I think a challenge that first-years might face that people don't really talk about is when to eat. When I came to UCLA, it took time for me to figure out when I would eat lunch or dinner. Small things like that and just being more independent were struggles for me, but with time and with good support and friends, it definitely got better.





UC Irvine

UC Irvine stands out in the heart of Orange County for its innovation and commitment to academic excellence. It ranks among the nation's top 10 public universities for the ninth year in a row, according to U.S. News & World Report. Recognized as an R1: Doctoral University with very high research activity, the campus offers strong academic programs, particularly in its Honors College, and fosters an active research environment. Three UCI faculty, one postdoctoral scholar, and one alumnus have received a Nobel Prize, underscoring the university's impact. Notable alumni include David Benioff, co-creator of Game of Thrones, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Ford, reflecting the success of UC Irvine graduates.

UC Irvine's campus features a unique circular layout with Aldrich Park at its center, creating a sense of community and connection. Students are known for their school spirit and have claimed multiple Guinness World Records over the years, adding to the lively campus culture.

Most popular majors

- Biological Sciences
- Business Administration
- Computer Science
- Psychology
- Engineering
- Public Health

General Info

- Year founded: 1965
- Number of students: 38,000
- Student to staff ratio: 18:1
- Acceptance rate: 21%
- Graduation rate: 87%
- Majors: 85+

VARUN AJITH

Research, Medicine, and the Journey to Becoming a Doctor

Varun is a second-year student at UC Irvine, double majoring in Biological Sciences and Public Health Policy. He's passionate about neuroscience and has been involved in research at the UC Irvine School of Medicine, including labs that study Alzheimer's disease. He hopes to become a doctor, using his research skills to make a difference.

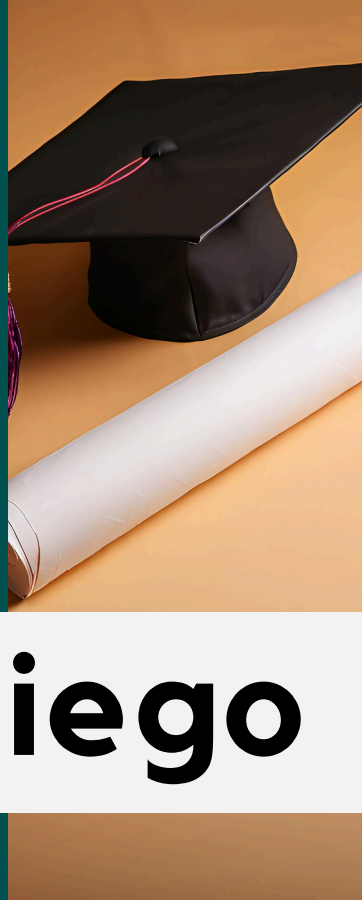
A passion for learning about viruses might sound like a niche interest, but for Varun, it was a natural step toward his goal of becoming a doctor. During high school, he completed a Polygence project researching how the frame-shift element of the COVID-19 genome helps the virus reproduce quickly inside cells and explored potential treatments to slow its spread. His Polygence mentor guided him through background research and taught him how to use tools like PubMed, giving him valuable research skills that still serve him today. That experience sparked his curiosity and motivated him to pursue more research opportunities at UC Irvine, where he now works in the Center of Neurobiology and Behavior studying Alzheimer's disease. "The hands-on experience I got from Polygence really helped me step into this research role with more confidence," he says.

Varun says that one of the things he enjoys most about UC Irvine is the collaborative research environment. "At UCI, everyone is trying to help you learn, and it's really motivating," he shares, adding that the beautiful weather and campus scenery make it a great place to study.



Put yourself out there—get to know people, professors, and other students—it can lead to opportunities like letters of recommendation and research roles.

He loves that there are so many opportunities to get involved in research, with professors and labs that encourage students to take on challenges. For high school students interested in research, Varun recommends exploring what excites them and using their free time to try new things, because those experiences can help them stand out on college applications and build skills for the future. He also encourages students to ask for help, build connections with professors and peers, and stay open to new experiences. Reflecting on his own journey, he emphasizes that "communication and being open to new experiences can make a huge difference in your journey." When he first started college, Varun found it challenging to balance academics, clubs, and other activities. He initially joined too many clubs and felt overwhelmed, but by focusing on the activities that mattered most, he was able to manage his time better and feel more balanced.



UC San Diego

Located in sunny La Jolla, UC San Diego is known for its innovative spirit and strong focus on science, engineering, and medicine. Founded in 1960, it has quickly grown into one of the top public universities in the country, with a strong research environment, cutting-edge technology, and numerous opportunities for undergraduate research. The university offers more than 140 majors and is one of the leading institutions in the nation for sponsored research funding. Notable alumni include Robert Gaskins, the creator of PowerPoint, and Paul Jacobs, the former chairman and CEO of Qualcomm, showing how UC San Diego graduates lead in tech and innovation.

The campus is home to over 220,000 eucalyptus trees, giving it a distinct and peaceful atmosphere. Its iconic Geisel Library, named after Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss), is a futuristic landmark that inspires creativity. With seven unique colleges and beaches just minutes away, UC San Diego is a place where students can thrive both academically and socially.

Most popular majors

- Biology
- Computer Science
- Economics
- Psychology
- Political Science
- Engineering

General Info

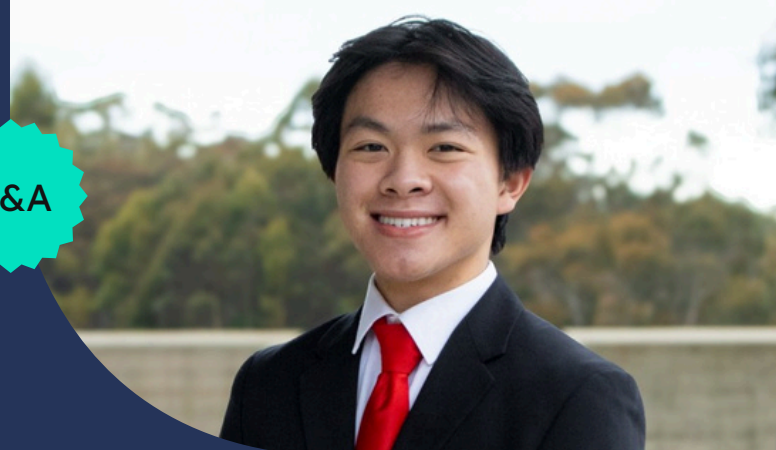
- Year founded: 1960
- Number of students: 43,000
- Student to staff ratio: 19:1
- Acceptance rate: 24%
- Graduation rate: 86%
- Majors: 140+

Let's Chat With

VINCENT NGUYEN

Gaining Research Skills for a Future in Medicine

Q&A



Can you tell us about your Polygence project?

Polygence was probably one of the best decisions I made in high school. For my Polygence research project, I focused on dentistry, specifically a comparison between root canal treatment and dental implants, their outcomes, and success rates. What my mentor and I did was we looked through many research articles and my mentor taught me how to take important information out of them. I was able to compile the data together to write my own literature review where I compared the two treatments to see which one was more effective.

How did your Polygence project influence your college path?

So, during high school, I really wanted to become a doctor. Participating in Polygence helped me become more involved in the scientific field, especially with research. The topic of my research project also influenced me for my major, which is microbiology, because I wanted to learn more about how biology works in microenvironments. The project really helped me become more interested, especially in the scientific field.

What do you like most about UC San Diego?

What I like about UCSD outside of academics are the people that I've been able to meet. Especially my roommates and people from other clubs that I've joined. I've also really enjoyed playing sports here because there is an intramural league where I've been able to play basketball with a lot of my friends.

What challenges did you face during your first year?

Some of the challenges that I faced during my first year were the actual rigor of education and the difference from high school because on a quarter system, the academics are really fast-paced and there's not a lot of time for you to study compared to other systems. So one of the challenges definitely was, especially for science courses, the actual rigor of the course.

What advice would you give to students applying to UC schools?

The advice I would give to students applying to UC schools is to really focus on your personal insight questions because you're more than just your grades, you're more than just a letter. Your personal insight questions really give admissions officers an insight into your life. If you can start early on your personal insight questions and make them about you, not about other people or your family members, but about you, then I think that's the best thing you can do for your application.

Any tips for students entering college?

Some tips I would give are to first stay focused on what you want to do when you go to college because there are so many distractions that can throw you off the path that you want to go into. So just try to stay focused. Another thing is to also network. Try to always meet new people because you never know when there's an opportunity that can come up from someone else that you meet. So definitely networking and staying focused would be the best options in college.

AMY WANG

Turning Research into Real-World Business

Amy is a junior at UC San Diego majoring in Business Economics with a minor in Marketing.

She's passionate about entrepreneurship, connecting communities, and making the most of her college experience.

An unexpected egg shortage at Costco sparked Amy's interest in business during her sophomore year of high school. Through her Polygence project, she built a channel connecting local Chinese farmers with people who needed eggs. With help from her mentor, she created surveys and conducted interviews with farmers and communities to understand their needs. "Usually, they just posted in a WeChat group, and only their friends would buy," she explained. Amy collected that information and used a SWOT analysis and value proposition to create a business model. She even designed an app and made a PowerPoint presentation, recording a voiceover to explain it all. That project showed her the power of business to make a difference, and it inspired her to choose Business Economics as her major.

She believes a standout UC application requires a focus on the personal insight questions, reminding students that they are more than just their grades or a single letter on a transcript. The essays are the space to let admissions officers see your story, and she advises making them about yourself rather than your family or others. Starting early, she says, gives you time to really think about what you want to share.



Amy emphasizes that time management is one of the most important skills to master in college. She recommends planning each day carefully, as classes can run from morning to evening, making it easy to lose track of time. For her, tools like Apple Calendar and Google Calendar help keep everything organized, from classes and assignments to club activities, so nothing slipped through the cracks.

At UC San Diego, Amy loves the supportive and vibrant community she has found. When she first arrived on campus, she did not know anyone, but she quickly found her place by joining three clubs that matched her interests: a business club, a Chinese club for international students, and a table tennis club. These activities kept her busy and gave her a sense of belonging, filling her days with everything from classes to table tennis practice to working on business plan proposals just for fun. She also appreciates the ocean views and beautiful weather that make campus life feel even more welcoming.

DANIEL MARKAROV

From Machine Learning Research to DNA Repair

Daniel is a freshman at UC San Diego studying Bioengineering. He's passionate about science and technology, with particular interests in bioinformatics, robotics, and astrobiology. He is currently a Laboratory Assistant at the Zhou Lab, where he supports research on DNA damage repair.

Daniel's interest in science and technology began during his Polygence project, where he explored the applications of machine learning in healthcare. With his mentor's guidance, he collected datasets and analyzed breast cancer tumor data to predict histologies and malignant tumors. "It was a really interesting experience because I got to apply machine learning to real-world problems in healthcare, which motivated me to dive deeper into this field," he shares. Now at UC San Diego, Daniel is gaining hands-on experience as a lab assistant in the Department of Cellular and Molecular Medicine. As a freshman, he helps with lab maintenance like autoclaving and preparing petri dishes, but also works under master's students on experiments related to DNA damage repair. These experiments range from chromatin assays to spotting assays and survivor testing, and Daniel is excited to be part of it.

Daniel says that one of the things he enjoys most about UC San Diego is the constant energy and variety of campus life.



Whether it's cultural events, career fairs, club fairs, or art galleries, there is always something happening that matches his interests.

He also loves the Southern California weather and the beautiful architecture and scenery on campus. For students applying to or attending UC San Diego, Daniel emphasizes the importance of knowing how to advocate for yourself. "There are so many resources here, like supplementary instruction, tutoring, and study groups, but you have to seek them out. Don't be afraid to ask for help or take advantage of what's available. That's how you'll get the most out of your experience here."

He explains that there are countless resources on campus that can help students succeed, but it is up to each student to seek them out and make the most of these opportunities. Daniel encourages students to be proactive, ask questions, and make an effort to use the support available to them. He believes that by doing so, students can make the most of their time at UC San Diego and build the skills they need to succeed in college and beyond.



UC SANTA BARBARA

Picture a campus right by the beach where you can take a study break with your feet in the sand. UC Santa Barbara has a beautiful setting, strong academics, and a strong focus on research, with more than 60 Guggenheim Fellows and 12 national research centers and institutes. The easygoing but focused vibe makes it clear why students love surfing between classes, participating in research, and getting involved in the local arts scene.

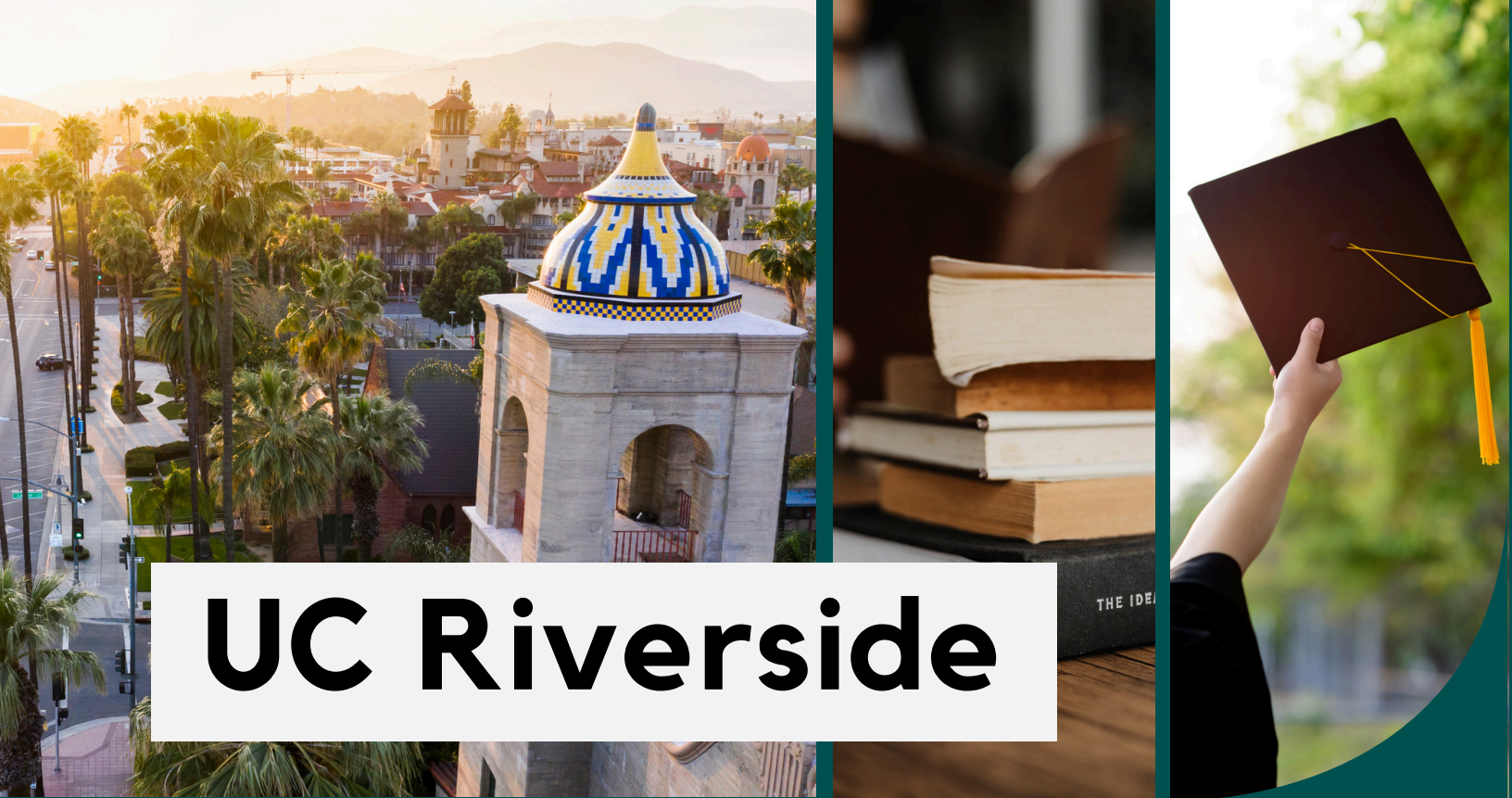
UC SANTA CRUZ

Tucked in the redwoods with a view of the ocean, UC Santa Cruz feels like a special place to learn. It is known for being creative and welcoming, where students often study outdoors, hike forest trails, and enjoy an atmosphere that encourages fresh ideas. Alumni have won awards like the Pulitzer Prize, and best-selling authors like Jayne Ann Krentz started their writing journeys here.



UC MERCED

UC Merced is the newest addition to the UC system and is also the fastest-growing public university in the nation. The campus is full of fresh energy and is nestled in California's farmland, creating a close-knit community where everyone has a chance to shine. It is dedicated to helping the environment and finding innovative solutions. UC Merced also stands out as a leader in undergraduate research, with 77% of students participating.



UC Riverside

Located in Inland Southern California, UC Riverside is best known for its strong research programs and friendly campus. Since opening in 1954, UCR has grown into a lively university with more than 80 majors across many different fields like biology, business, psychology, computer science, and engineering. It is home to two Nobel Prize winners and researchers who helped create embodied audio through EDGE Sound Research. One student even designed a Disney Imagineering course that blended creativity and innovation. Notable alumni include Steve Breen, a Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist, and actress Jamie Chung, showing how UCR students go on to succeed in creative and meaningful ways.

The campus is home to over 25,000 students from more than 80 countries. UCR is the only UC campus with a low residency M.F.A. program and a [standalone B.A. in Creative Writing](#). Often ranked as one of the most diverse universities in the country, UCR brings people together through cultural events, student groups, and a strong sense of community.

Most popular majors

- Biology
- Business Administration
- Psychology
- Computer Science
- Mechanical Engineering
- Political Science

General Info

- Year founded: 1954
- Number of students: 26,000
- Student to staff ratio: 22:1
- Acceptance rate: 66%
- Graduation rate: 77%
- Majors: 80+

Q&A

Let's Chat With

ANUSHKA SHINDE

Shaping a Path in Psychology and Research

Can you tell us about yourself and what brought you to Polygence?

I'm a first-year psychology major at UC Riverside. I've wanted to study psychology almost my whole life because I'm really passionate about mental health. That's what led me to Polygence. I wanted to do a research project on mood disorders and how different parenting styles like authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglectful affect mental health outcomes, focusing on bipolar disorder, depression, and anxiety. The project really confirmed my passion for psychology and even made me consider psychiatry. Polygence was so helpful in that process.

Had you ever read or written a scientific paper before?

No, not really. I had never written a paper before, and I had barely even read any, except maybe for a class assignment. I went into Polygence completely blind, but my mentor guided me through every step. She taught me how to do research, how to cite sources, and even gave me other papers to read so I could understand what a research paper looked like. The Polygence platform was also helpful because I could share drafts with her. She would review them and provide feedback, which improved my writing a lot.

Did you publish your paper?

Yes, I did. I published it with Young Rising Scholars through Curieaux. It was actually a really easy process. My mentor helped me pick where to publish it, and now when you search my name, it shows up, which is really cool.

What was your first-year experience at UC Riverside like?

It has been really great. Everyone here is so nice, and the professors are really supportive. My research project helped a lot because I already knew many of the topics in my first psychology class, which made it feel easier. Psychology is a really fun subject, and there are so many resources on campus. The TAs and professors have all been great, and I have not had a bad experience with any class so far.

Did you mention your research project in your college applications?

Yes, I included it in one of my UC essays that asked why I wanted to study my major. I talked about my research paper, my mentor Vicki, and the overall process. I also mentioned it in club applications, volunteering, and when applying for the honors program. It really came in handy.

What skills and mindsets do you think are important for success in college?

Being open is so important. College is a completely new environment, and it is easy to feel out of place. Joining clubs, getting involved, and making friends are really helpful. Time management is also huge because everything moves so fast. Surrounding yourself with the right people and building connections can make a big difference.



Advice from

UC MERCED COMPUTER SCIENCE PROFESSOR, ROSS GREER



Tell us about the computer science & engineering program at UC Merced. What makes it stand out?

Our program teaches students fundamental concepts in computer science, mathematics, engineering, and physical sciences to open doors to many career opportunities and specialized graduate programs. Areas of elective study include Artificial Intelligence, Computer Vision, Cybersecurity, Big Data and Data-base Systems, Human Computer Interaction, Machine Learning, Robotics, Software Engineering, and more.

Two things make UC Merced stand out most among its peers. UC Merced has received recognition as being the #1 university in the US for social mobility, creating the most access to opportunity for students of any background, and our Computer Science & Engineering department has a notably high amount of opportunities for undergraduates to undertake research experience and mentorship with faculty, making graduate school preparation more accessible than many other campuses.

What skills & mindsets are important to be successful at UC Merced?

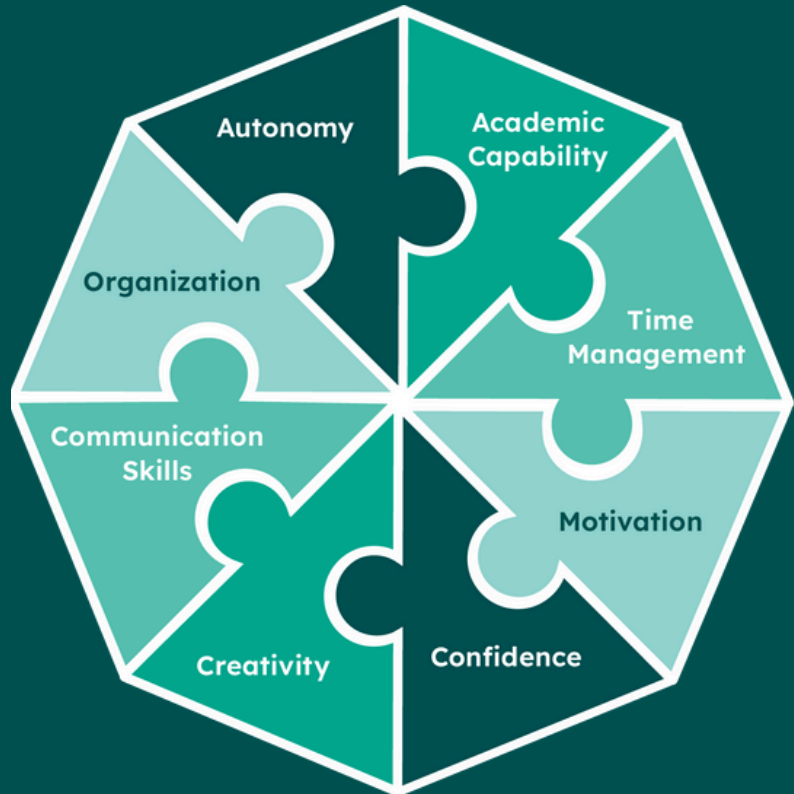
I often see two opposing and dispiriting mindsets in my classes, to which I would offer the same remedy: come to UC Merced (or any other university) with an open mind. Some students approach their courses or research opportunities with a closed or checklist mindset ("I already know this" / "I just need to check 'research project' on my resume to get a summer internship") and often miss wonderful opportunities for new learning, mentorship, and awesome experiences once their eyes are opened to the broader computer science field. In the exact same way, other students approach with a mindset of "I'm not cut out for computer science. I haven't written a computer program before. I'm already too far behind." or "I'm not really the 'computer science type, and wouldn't fit in with the program." If you've worked hard in your high school math courses, computer science is for you. You don't need to arrive with any special training or experience—that's the whole point of studying here!

Take the time at university to change the way you think about the world and really think about the challenges you are provided in your courses and lab assignments. Even if you move through your work a bit slower, you will have a much more rewarding experience stretching your brain instead of mimicking output of your favorite LLM. Go to class, go to office hours, study with peers, and enjoy the vibrant community available to you at this unique campus. In sharing your goals with classmates, TAs, and faculty, you'll find a wide reach of support of others who want to help you along your academic journey.

About Polygence

Over the past five years, we've helped thousands of students turn curiosity into achievement through hands-on projects and mentorship.

We've identified eight key skills that foster long-term success, and our students consistently say their Polygence mentors and projects were pivotal in preparing them for college and beyond.



Scan here
to apply

What is Polygence Core?

A student-directed, project-based research experience, Core includes:

- 10 online, one-on-one sessions with an expert mentor
- Polygence student workspace & built-in organization tools
- Mentor chat for questions
- 2 rounds of feedback from a writing fellow
- Access to the Polygence showcasing opportunity database

Polygence Core

College preparedness through one-on-one mentorship and project-based learning.



The **Core Program** helps students build the following **skills & strengths**:

Topic Selection

Core students choose their subject, research question and outcome to work toward.

Skills & Strengths

Autonomy & Motivation

Research Process

Students inquire beyond the surface, continuously asking why & expanding the boundaries of their knowledge. They also build an organization system and learn how to keep track of resources & assignments.

Skills & Strengths

Academic Capability & Organization

Mentorship Sessions

A one-on-one conversation with a PhD candidate might feel intimidating at first. But by the end of Core, your student will have had ten in-depth conversations, exchanged feedback & more.

Skills & Strengths

Communication Skills & Confidence

Persevering

All projects encounter roadblocks & challenges. Mentors help students problem solve creatively.

Skills & Strengths

Creativity & Motivation

Project Progress

For many Core students, this is their first time setting their own goals, including project duration, pace, and meeting schedules with mentors. This process helps them think critically about what needs to be done and how long it will take.

Skills & Strengths

Time Management

Project Completion

A research project challenges students, with mentors providing tools instead of answers. This process boosts students' belief in their own abilities, with both parents and students reporting significant growth.

Skills & Strengths

Autonomy & Confidence