

# Caitlin Le

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*IDEA Center's Spotlight for Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month*



## Quick Facts

Grade: Class of 2023

Major: Mechanical Engineering with a Specialization in Controls and Robotics

Outside Interests: Ice hockey, reading, baking, video games

## Questions about your experiences:

**What personal significance does Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month have for you? How do you celebrate AAPI heritage month?**

AAPI Heritage Month means a lot to my family and me. My parents immigrated from Vietnam and I am a first generation Asian American. I celebrate by learning about how Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants have shaped and will continue to shape this country. I was very lucky to have grown up in an accepting and diverse community, but other people have not had the same experiences I have had, so I believe that it is important to listen and learn about other people's experiences. Celebrating AAPI Heritage Month is an important reminder to do just this.

**As an Asian woman engineering student, do you feel supported by UC San Diego and its programs? How have you overcome these challenges during your college career?**

I do feel supported to a certain extent. I enjoy attending student organization meetings for underrepresented groups and hanging out with other students who can relate. At UCSD, there are a number of great student organizations, like SASE and SHPE, and I definitely think that the presence of these groups is important in creating positive experiences for many undergraduate students. Sometimes it's hard to remember that you're not alone, so talking with other students who have similar experiences helped me overcome the challenges of being in an underrepresented group.

However, I do believe that there is room for improvement in representing women in the engineering field. There aren't many engineering professors who are women, nor are there many students who are women in engineering. The number of women in the field is increasing, but should definitely be higher than what it is.

**You have been a Peer Educator since your freshman year. What inspired you to join? What has been the most rewarding moment in your tenure?**

When I first started at UCSD, I attended a bunch of ELCs, which was really helpful for studying course material, but my favorite part was being able to hang out with other students in my classes. The community of students across multiple engineering majors made me feel welcomed as a new student, which inspired me to become a Peer Educator. The most rewarding part is talking to students I've tutored in the past and hearing how they've been doing and seeing all of the cool things they're working on. Being friends with everyone outside of the classroom is really the purpose of the ELCs, and I'm glad that it's something I'm able to do.

**You currently work in the Gravish Lab. How does your work in the lab align with your research interests?**

My work in Gravish Lab was understanding the mechanics of burrowing and moving within sand and creating robots that can do this. I studied how animals burrow and how soft robots can mimic these creatures. Before joining the lab, I loved building robots, but I wanted to see where the field was heading and how we can use soft robots in our daily lives. My current research interests still include bio-inspired soft robotics for robot locomotion, but I hope to apply this technology to help people move in the future.

**What made you want to pursue research? How did you get started in research?**

Before doing research, I was building robots in a student organization and was interested in testing novel mechanisms and designs. The competition schedule of the org didn't allow for too much research and development, so I started looking into research labs at UCSD where I could spend more time experimenting with ideas. I applied to the GEAR Program and got placed into Gravish Lab, where I got to do exactly this! The GEAR Program is great because they teach you basic research skills to help you succeed while doing research in an actual lab, which was great for me because I had no prior experience doing research. inspire its Latinx population.

**As part of the hockey team, how do you balance your academics, work as a Peer Educator, research, and sports? What is your favorite part of being on the team?**

Balancing everything can sometimes be overwhelming, but I found that doing things you love makes it way easier! I'm always looking forward to doing my work and activities since they make me happy, so I don't feel too stressed about my schedule. Also, writing down a schedule helps me visualize what needs to be done. For the hockey team, I mainly play in a women's league, which I didn't do growing up, so my favorite part is how kind everyone is. The games aren't too competitive and everyone is just there to have fun!

**Congratulations on your acceptance to multiple schools for your PhD! What inspired you to pursue a PhD, and what will you be researching?**

Being a Peer Educator really solidified my passion for teaching and the GEAR Program brought out my love for research, which made my decision to pursue a PhD an easy one. I really want to become a professor so getting a PhD is an absolute must. And next fall, I will be continuing research in the soft robotics field at Yale!