

Cynthia Guzman

*IDEA Center's Spotlight on UC San Diego's
First-Generation Engineers*

Grade: 4th Year

Major: Mechanical Engineering

Outside Interests: roller skating, crocheting



You have been a part of the IDEA Engineering Student Center ever since the beginning of your collegiate career - starting off as a participant in the Summer Engineering Institute and now as the Program Assistant. How has your experience benefitted your collegiate career?

The Summer Engineering Institute was probably the most impactful experience to my collegiate career. I made connections with peers, who I still lean on for support in classes, as well as with UCSD professors and staff which helped me find my positions in research and as a Program Assistant for the ACES Program. Having that transition experience over the summer also helped me feel a bit less overwhelmed when I finally started the quarter because I became familiar with the campus.

One of my most memorable experiences that came from participating in the Summer Engineering Institute as an ACES Scholar was having a Latina mentor who is a professor in the MAE department. I was inspired by her accomplishments and felt validated for the shared feeling of intimidation from being one of the few women in project teams and classes.

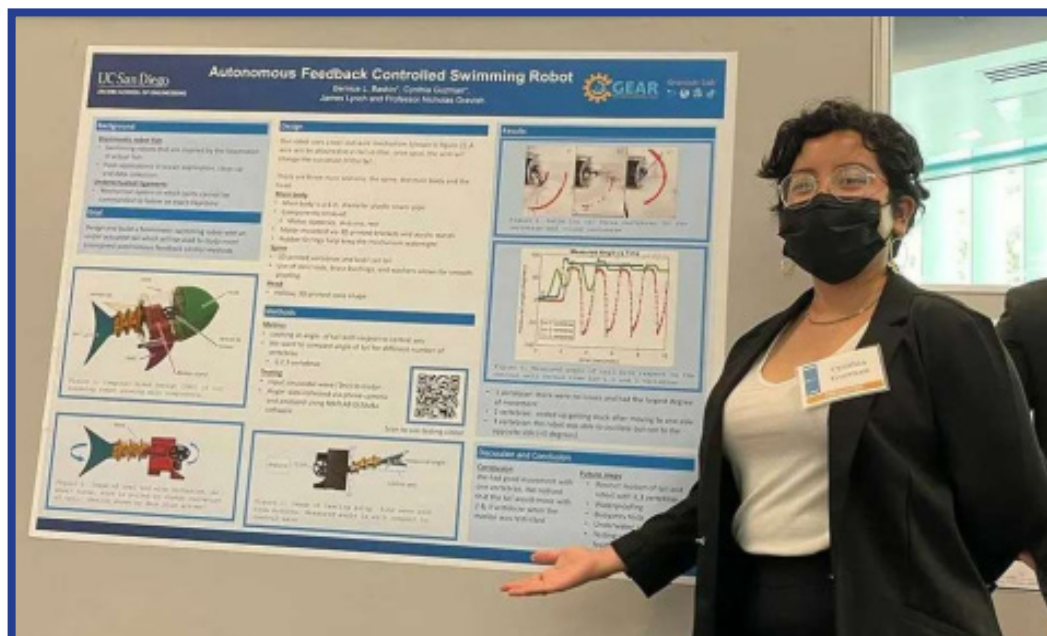
During my time as a Program Assistant, I've had the opportunity to work with other students who come from a similar background as me. I was able to bring in my own experiences and needs to learn how to best support my peers. This kind of communication also helped me learn how best to advocate for myself and express my opinions.

Having been involved in different research labs throughout your undergraduate career, what is the most motivating aspect about your research?

The most motivating aspect of my research was hearing from the people in the lab. At first, I was intimidated by their knowledge and years of experience but they were all welcoming and supportive of my work, asking questions and offering advice. My supervisor, especially would give me advice on my research, my presentations and on professional networking which I've put to use now that I'm looking for professional opportunities. He was also someone that I felt comfortable openly talking about personal and academic issues. I found myself turning to him when I wanted advice on professional development such as with creating a personal website. I found my experience at research labs very rewarding, developing my communication and presentation skills and even helping to clarify my future career path.

What advice would you give to new undergraduate students in engineering on getting involved in research?

When I first went into research, I wasn't confident in my ability to apply my knowledge onto a project. I feared that I wouldn't be able to offer much because of my inexperience and was often discouraged when I saw some of my more successful peers. I've learned that I'm not expected to have extensive knowledge on any topic and there are plenty of people in labs that would love to help you learn and want to see you grow. The graduate students and even the principal investigator are all incredible resources and will offer plenty of support. It's definitely intimidating but don't think that you're too inexperienced to try. You are more capable than you know!



As a Latina 1st generation engineering student, do you feel supported by UC San Diego and the Jacobs School of Engineering? What could they do better?

I do feel supported by UC San Diego and feel encouraged by the spotlight on diversity orgs such as SWE and SHPE. I especially like the technical workshops and support SHPE offers. For instance, I participated in an intro to using Inventor with a few other students. This weekly workshop helped build my confidence with computer-aided design and provided a casual space for learning. I've felt a nice sense of community from participating in both orgs and feel lucky to have good friends in both.

What I think we could be giving more attention to is the community of queer Latinx students. As person who identifies as a part of the queer community and is a part of multiple minority groups, I'd like to see more intersection between the queer and ethnic diversity groups. For me, it's definitely rewarding to find others who are a part of multiple minority groups because of the lack of representation. This is why I believe it's important to acknowledge this smaller community within diversity groups and highlight more queer, Latinx working professionals.

What advice would you give to new undergraduate students in engineering who identify as Latinx and/or first-generation students on how best to navigate through college?

When I first came on campus, I felt very isolated. As a first-generation student, I lacked parental guidance for anything college-related. Getting involved in diversity student organizations that shared my background (such as SHPE, oSTEM and SWE), gave me the opportunity to connect with peers, form study groups or find a place to relax. This was also how I found out about on-campus events and opportunities. These orgs are a great way to learn more about the San Diego community through outreach programs such as high school tutoring or mentorships. I found these orgs to be the best resource for navigating college life, especially during freshman year.