

# Milena Salazar

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*IDEA Center's Spotlight on  
UC San Diego's Women Engineers*

## Quick Facts

Grade: Third Year

Major: Structural Engineering with a Minor in Educational Studies

Outside Interests: Thrifting, Embroidery, Film, Music



## Questions about your experiences:

**What personal significance does Women's History Month have for you? Why is it important to celebrate it?**

As a woman in engineering, Women's History Month has a personal significance to my identity. I believe we live in a society where there are still many inequalities that women still face today such as higher societal expectations, day to day safety, and the disproportionate wage gap. Women play a significant role in this world as they have brought great accomplishments and sacrifices. However, their voices can often be unheard. This month gives women a platform to be represented and celebrated.

Women's History Month is important to celebrate because women are a minority in society, and with this month, we are not only able to empower future generations of women but also remember all the sacrifices, triumphs, and hard work that women have contributed to society.

## **You are actively involved on campus, what makes you passionate about bridging the gap between minorities and engineering?**

In my first year, I experienced a large gap in the education system as a double minority where I struggled to navigate college. Similarly, the lack of representation for my identity in my field led to a place of self doubt, discouragement, and “imposter syndrome”. Through finding a supportive community that helped me overcome these struggles, I became motivated to help others who may see their identity as a barrier in their education.

My journey as a minority led me to grow an interest in learning about social justice, leadership, and the education system. I became actively involved in exploring these topics by attending TCLI (Triton Community Leadership Institute), working as an orientation leader, and now serving as an RA at Sixth College! Through these leadership experiences, I strengthened my knowledge on equity and inclusion, and became educated on ways to best support minorities in the transition to higher education. I was also able to experience a hands-on approach to education by working as a Teaching Assistant under COSMOS and volunteering as a Bilingual Tutor with Project in the Box. These experiences have been extremely rewarding, and allowed me to find a passion for supporting minorities in engineering.

## **What is the best part of being involved with SHPE (Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers) and SWE (Society of Women Engineers)?**

I have been involved in SHPE since my first year, and I was able to have leadership positions as Junior Representative last year and Vice President Internal this year. Throughout my involvement, the best part of being in SHPE has been the amazing opportunities and community.

SHPE has given me the opportunities for scholarships, research, grad school, and professional development. For example, SHPE funded me to go to the National Conference in Orlando, FL where I was able to network with hundreds of fellow SHPE members and companies. Through this experience, I gained confidence in my professionalism.

SHPE has also given me a community where I feel heard and supported. I found it difficult to find people who resonated with me as a Hispanic. However, this organization has helped me meet people not only regionally, but also nationally! It is really awesome and empowering to have people of a similar background through this journey.

The best part of SWE has been volunteering as an Empowerment & Development for Girls in Engineering Mentor. In this program, mentors encourage high school girls to consider STEM-related careers to help bridge the gender gap in engineering fields. This has been a very rewarding experience because I was able to build a community that fosters encouragement and diversity for future generations of women in engineering.

## What has your journey been like as an IDEA Scholar? What have you gained from this experience?

Being an IDEA Scholar has been one of my favorite experiences at UCSD. It all began in SEI where I got to meet our cohort and build lasting memories with my peers. During this experience, I learned about all the different resources offered at JSOE. I also benefited from the Big-Little Program by gaining insightful advice from my Big, and passing down my knowledge to my Littles. With our weekly discussions, I was able to learn about opportunities, grad school, and professionalism. These discussions have allowed me to peak an interest in research and grow my confidence as an aspiring engineer.

Through the IDEA Scholar program, I have been able to obtain amazing mentors, gain professional skills, and build a supportive and lasting community.

## How has your perspective as a first-generation latina woman influenced your experience at UC San Diego?

My perspective as a first-generation Latina woman has influenced my determination and motivation to pursue engineering. Being first-gen, the transition to UCSD was extremely difficult as I began to doubt myself if college was right for me. As a woman and a Hispanic in STEM, not only is it difficult to find opportunities but it is also a difficult environment since there are not many people who look like me in my field. There are many barriers, stereotypes, and inequities that I have faced as a Latina in engineering. Although I did initially see this as a challenge, I learned to use this experience as a motivation to defy the odds. I also believe that my perspective has made me more aware of the educational inequities at UCSD that others may or may not experience. My identity as a double minority has pushed me to prove that Hispanic women can be engineers. Only about 2 percent of engineers are Hispanic women, and I look forward to becoming one of them. Si Se Puede!



## **As a Latina engineering student, do you feel supported by UC San Diego Jacobs School of Engineering? What could they do better?**

I do feel supported by UC San Diego to a certain extent. I think their support and drive for diversity orgs like SHPE and SWE has helped me feel supported because I was able to find a community that resonated with my identity.

I also think JSOE can improve on faculty and student interaction. I believe I have not been given many opportunities to meet my professors outside of the classroom except in office hours. Since the faculty does not make an effort to get to know their students' identity, I often feel disconnected. This also causes them to be unaware of how to support minorities like myself. By increasing interaction between students and faculty, I would feel more connected to my classes and supported in the engineering community.

However, I think I overall feel more supported than other students do because I was lucky to have attended the Engineering Overnight Program (EOP) before attending UCSD. In this program, I learned about the different resources and opportunities available at JSOE. I know many engineering minority students were not able to attend EOP, so I think UCSD JSOE can do better in promoting their resources whether it be increasing its presence on campus or highlighting its benefits through social media.

## **From your experiences, what advice would you offer current or future women in engineering? Would you give the same advice if you knew you were speaking with a student who identified as a woman of color?**

I would tell current or future women in engineering to not let their identity define their capabilities and highlight the importance of finding a supportive community. Never give up on yourself! You are capable of much more than you think!

I thought I was never going to be as successful as my peers and that I would never find the right community for me because of my identity. I would compare myself to my peers and only saw my identity as a deficit. However, once I embraced my identity and found my community, I gained confidence in my capabilities. I can proudly say I am involved in prosthetic research, a recipient for multiple scholarships, and successfully secured an engineering internship for this summer. The accomplishments I have made this past year for myself have felt like a dream come true. However, I could not have done it without my supportive community who has been there for me throughout this journey.

I would overall give students who identify as POC the same advice. However, I would also advise them to find a community where they can dive into their culture. It can feel like a big culture shock to not be surrounded by the same language or traditions in college. So, a supportive cultural community can help facilitate this and feel very empowering throughout one's journey in engineering!

# About Women's History Month

Women's History Month had its origins as a national celebration in 1981 when Congress passed Pub. L. 97-28 which authorized and requested the President to proclaim the week beginning March 7, 1982 as "Women's History Week." Throughout the next five years, Congress continued to pass joint resolutions designating a week in March as "Women's History Week." In 1987 after being petitioned by the National Women's History Project, Congress passed Pub. L. 100-9 which designated the month of March 1987 as "Women's History Month." Between 1988 and 1994, Congress passed additional resolutions requesting and authorizing the President to proclaim March of each year as Women's History Month. Since 1995, presidents have issued a series of annual proclamations designating the month of March as "Women's History Month." These proclamations celebrate the contributions women have made to the United States and recognize the specific achievements women have made over the course of American history in a variety of fields.

The theme for UC San Diego's 2022 Women's Herstory Month is "Our stories are Our Strength: Past, Present, and Future"

Sources:

<https://womenshistorymonth.gov/about/>

<https://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/feature/25-years-of-the-womens-center>