

# Paula Kirya

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*IDEA Center's Spotlight on UC San Diego's Future Black Engineers*



## Quick Facts

Grade: Class of 2023

Major: Bioengineering

Outside Interests: Dancing, running, reading, spending time with friends

## Questions about your experiences:

**Tell us about your transfer journey. What have been your biggest challenges before attending UCSD and in your time as a student here?**

When I got my first college admission decisions in high school, I was confronted with the prospect of being tens and thousands of dollars in debt at the age of 17. It was made even harder to stick by such a decision knowing I had no clue what I wanted to major in or what career I wanted. I attended Pasadena City College (PCC) immediately after graduating high school to figure out what I wanted to pursue without the financial burden of university tuition weighing over me. My biggest challenge was probably navigating this experience and eventually deciding on an engineering major, knowing that it would make the transfer process longer and the social and academic aspects of my education more complicated.

I was very adventurous with my academic and extracurricular experiences during my time at PCC. This led to the development of my interest in research within the intersection of biology and engineering, resulting in my decision to transfer to UCSD in the Fall of 2020 as a bioengineering major. Since transferring, I've conducted research as a McNair scholar and a fellow of the UC San Diego Materials Research Science and Engineering Center (MRSEC). I am currently working in the Poulikakos Lab leading research projects I could not have seen myself attempting four years ago.

## **Why did you join the Transfer Engineering Academic Mentorship Program? What valuable experiences have you had in your time with TEAM?**

As someone who spent their first year as a transfer at home, I had a rough transition into student life at UCSD. I knew nothing of the San Diego housing market and spent months trying to find a living arrangement I could afford in time to transfer in person. When I finally arrived, I didn't know anyone in the area and was unfamiliar with my transfer cohort. I was intimidated by the size of the campus population and the sureness everyone seemed to have in their abilities. Upon meeting other transfers and reconnecting with friends I had made at community college, I remember wishing we had all been better prepared for the realities of this process.

Having finally reached my last year as an undergraduate transfer student, I have learned and grown a lot. I became a TEAM coordinator with the hopes of providing transfer students with the resources to maneuver through this process with the reassurance I didn't have. The TEAM program has been amazing, and it's been fun meeting both the mentors and mentees and learning about their stories.

## **What advice would you offer current or future transfer students? What action have you taken that has most positively impacted your UCSD experience?**

The best advice I could offer to transfer students is to get out of their comfort zone and seek out resources that would help them best (like TEAM!). A lot of us begin our transfer journey feeling rushed. For most engineering majors, however, we have three years to check out different clubs, look into summer internships, gain research experiences and meet new people. During my first year, the pandemic prevented me from benefitting from the experiences I could gain on campus. In contrast, my second and third years have been far more eventful. I pursued several opportunities and took the time to explore my interests and see where that led me. There were hits and misses, but in this seemingly short amount of time, I joined a lab, developed critical engineering skills, presented at large conferences, and made new friends.

The action that's most positively impacted my UCSD experience has definitely been joining the Poulidakos lab. Here I've been able to explore different projects and grow as a researcher. Now in my last year as an undergraduate student, I feel confident in my decision to pursue a graduate education.

## **What personal significance does Black History Month have for you? How has being a Black woman shaped your experiences as an engineering student?**

I found out how fun Black History Month can be when I graduated high school and entered community college. I learned about different celebrations that took place in areas not too far from where I lived and was invited to participate in my first Black History Month parade, which really felt like a big party. Black History Month is important because it's a time when people can learn not just of the struggles black people have faced but the substantial artistic and intellectual contributions historic black figures have ingrained into our world.

While I was younger I attended a few different schools, all of which had virtually no black students. I didn't love that, but the time prepared me for the realities of pursuing an engineering degree as a black woman. However, some of my younger family members, my niece, in particular, have expressed interest in pursuing careers in engineering. Learning this was when I was most disturbed by the demographic isolation black women face in this field and hopeful for a future where that isn't the case.

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

I knew when applying to transfer to UCSD that it would have a very small black student population, especially in engineering. I also knew this would have been the case if I applied to the grand majority of California universities, so I dealt with the reality of my decision to pursue this education early on and frankly expected nothing from UCSD. As a black woman who had transferred to this school, my support throughout my education has primarily come from my close friends, mentors, and family. Historically and currently, most support and community for black students in institutions such as UCSD come from peer-led programs that work hard to advocate for them (like our school's NSBE and BRC) rather than the people running the institutions. I feel it is important for our mental health to be able to talk to people who understand our experience, in whatever space that is. Since the black experience isn't monolithic, I don't feel I'm the person to say what UCSD can do better for the few hundred black women who go here.

## **From your experiences, what advice would you offer current or future Black students in engineering?**

I remember thinking if I got certain grades or reached specific milestones my imposter syndrome would just go away, but that was very much not the case. I'm not sure if that's something that can be overcome entirely, so it's important that ensure you're not holding yourself back. I recommend applying for everything that remotely interests you, including whatever you may think you're unqualified for. As an engineering student at UCSD, you're already as qualified as everyone else to at least give things a shot. You'll probably surprise yourself!