Behind the Scenes: Scholarships Unit

We hear from two staff members: Assistant Director of Scholarships, Fabian Firoozi, and Manager of Scholarship Portfolio Development and Marketing, Kuni Kondo. Fabian Firoozi leads the entire unit, while Kuni Kondo handles the marketing and scholarship development group. They will explain their roles within the unit, how the unit works, and the future of UCI Scholarships.
Our 5-year plan is to significantly increase the scholarships portfolio in order to put UCI among the top 3 UC campuses in terms of scholarship fund disbursement. The Chancellor’s matching program for new endowments has already had impact and has had great success. We also want to increase the 4-year graduation rate and academic strength of UCI through additional summer and research-based scholarships. We have designed a process to tie scholarships to projects in order to promote innovation, creativity, and academic excellence in collaboration with schools and centers. Our envisioned future plan is feasible and exciting.

We have done a pretty good job of maintaining professional relationships with different departments on campus. Particularly at UC Irvine, I feel there is a very collaborative environment between departments, staff, and faculty. UCI is a close knit community, and it helps that we are all dedicated to helping our students. I have built many of these relationships over the years as a student affairs professional and as a UCI Alum, so I am very pleased to be able to build upon these relationships further in my role in the Scholarships Unit.

The pandemic has definitely made things challenging this year since we can’t engage with students in person. We are doing our best by doing outreach through social media, Zoom information sessions, live chats, and emails. We have also been working on updating our website and investing in new technology to assist with our outreach and application process. The best way for students to stay informed is to check their email consistently and follow our social media. We are pretty consistent with posting about important events on our social media, so I definitely recommend that students follow us for the most up-to-date information!

We really look at students holistically and review students based on several factors. Academics and research, financial need, leadership, overcoming adversity, and community service. It’s important that students share not only what they have done, but why these things are important for us to know. The better that they are able to engage the reviewer and share their narrative, the easier it is for the reviewer to be able to relate to them.

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John Tolipani

- Howard B. Lawson Memorial Scholar
- Strauss Scholar
- Michael B. O’Donoghue Veteran Scholar
- Film and Media Studies Major
- Senior

What organizations are you involved in on campus?

I participated in Zotfilm during the Fall 2019 quarter. I’m currently a content creation intern for Anteater TV.

John, explain your journey from serving in the military to attending UCI?

After high school, there weren’t any scholarships being tossed my way. I started working as a cook and planned to enlist in the military in late 2014. My experiences in the Navy opened my eyes to the fact that I’m not better than anyone. We all have different skill sets, come from different backgrounds, and have drastically different world views, but at our core, we’re all human. I believe that it is our character and our intentions that determines one’s worth. Overall, the military has made me a more well-rounded individual. After an eventful 4 years in the Navy, I finally got out and reentered the civilian world. I didn’t want to return home, so I made my way down to California. I began my time at Orange Coast College as a first-generation college student. Just the simple fact that nobody in my household attended college made it seem like it wasn’t even an option. After a year, I transferred to UCI to study film and media, something that had interested me ever since I was teenager. Now here I am, in my fourth year at UCI, about to graduate with a film degree.

Carol Luong

- Womxn’s Hub Dynamic Scholar
- Economics Major
- Senior

What organizations are you involved in on campus?

My mother and father left my sister and I around the age of 5. From then on, our grandparents raised us. Being a first-generation immigrant was difficult because I had no one to help me through high school to college. After attending UCI for a year, I had to withdraw for a year. I then worked full-time as a sales associate for Google, while also taking community college classes. I discovered my passion for technology and sales, which is what I will be pursuing for my career. I recognize that technology is the gateway for success, so I want students to be able to have it in order to succeed. I returned to UCI and will graduate at the end of this year!

Carol, please describe your journey to and at UCI.

Set up appointments to talk to UCI staff. It requires bravery to be vulnerable about your situation. I was not used to talking about myself, but by opening up to UCI staff and OFAS, I was able to find the help I needed. It gives more perspective and allows opportunities for success to come. Asking for help is how I was able to establish my action plan.

What advice do you have for other students struggling to afford college?

With scholarships, I could afford groceries and have a roof over my head. I was immediately grateful because I know the process is highly selective. But the simplicity of one application that allowed me to apply to many scholarships at once was a huge help.
The DREAM Center serves as a beacon of light for undocumented UCI students, providing essential services. Not only does it assist students with academic and professional development, but the center serves as a safe space and integral social hub for students. It is the backbone of the undocumented UCI student community.

Its director, Dr. Angela Chen, shares a personal connection to the center. She was an undocumented student, so she understands the struggles that these students face. While pursuing her undergraduate degree, she witnessed the inequity of academic and professional opportunities that students in her position experience. She then became dedicated to advocating for students and collaborated with institutions to better support all students.

The DREAM Center focuses on its community’s assets. It recognizes that its students are nearly all first-generation BIPOC. They are in majors across campus, including a large segment in STEAM fields with a growing number of graduate students. Many are highly involved in student leadership roles, research, teaching, and civic engagement. It celebrates diverse backgrounds, including race and ethnicity. The center also acknowledges that its students play supportive roles with their families. Ultimately, it believes that students’ lived-experiences add to UCI’s learning environment.

Compared to the average college student, an undocumented student faces additional hardships and stressors. Firstly, undocumented students in the country are ineligible for federal financial aid, which most UCI students rely on to afford a college education. Many students at UCI cut down on basic needs like food, rent, and clothing. It can also be difficult for undocumented students to find a warm community where they feel welcomed. Anti-immigrant sentiments and a lack of representation on campus can prevent them from finding a place of their own. They also experience inequitable access to academic and professional opportunities. Undocumented students may be unable to participate in research or be compensated for their work due to their status, even though they are just as capable, deserving, and eligible. Lastly, with all the additional stress, these students struggle emotionally and mentally. Studies have shown that undocumented college students experience heightened anxiety compared to their fellow students.

The DREAM Center truly cares about serving UCI’s undocumented student population. The center has a team of 3 professional staff and 19 student leaders working on community engagement and advising. It works tirelessly to provide much needed services to make sure its students have more equitable opportunities and resources at UCI. The center is a space dedicated to these students, so they can have a place and community of their own. Being an undocumented college student comes with these unprecedented challenges. But the DREAM Center is proof that these students don’t have to do it alone. Reach out to the center’s staff to find out more about its upcoming events and programs. It prides itself on being a key resource for undocumented students. They understand that affording college is extremely difficult. If you are an undocumented student at UCI and need assistance, please reach out to its staff. Even if you simply need a friend or support group, the DREAM Center has you covered.
Editor’s Note: 2021, The Year of Self-Care

As we continue to deal with the effects of the pandemic, we should make time to also focus on what can help us get through 2021, self-care. 2020 left us stressed, frustrated, lonely, and exhausted. In order for us to continue to succeed and achieve together, we must take care of our wellbeing.

Simply focusing on one area will lead to neglect of the other four. It is important to listen to yourself and replenish what your mind or body needs in all areas.

Self-care looks different for everyone. I like to think of self-care as whatever helps me to destress and enjoy the little things in life. For some, it may look like pampering oneself with a massage, bath bombs, face masks, etc. For others, it can be done through caring for one’s physical health: running, walking, swimming, or lifting weights. Some would rather not do any sort of physical activity and prefer to lay in bed all day playing video games or watch movies. There is no wrong way to do self-care (following proper COVID-19 protocols of course). The great thing about it is you can make it whatever you want it to be. Self-care doesn’t have to be some expensive trip to a spa. It’s adjustable to anyone’s time and budget restrictions.

Here is an article that explores the different types of self-care: physical, social, mental, spiritual, emotional. Many people do not realize that we need to pay attention to each of those five needs. Each plays an essential part in our lives and overall well-being.

Whatever your preferred self-care method is, make that time for yourself. We’ve learned that life can be scary and anxiety-ridden. So when things start to get overwhelming and unmanageable, take a break and implement a self-care activity. It could even be 5 minutes of meditating or a 15 minute nap. I like to envision self-care as a restart button, a way to readjust your mindset and mood. I am not saying self-care will fix everything, but it can help you to calm down and enjoy a small pleasure in life.