

The Academic Advancement Program, the nation's most successful university student retention program, celebrates 35 years of service to UCLA students.

Briana Padilla's immigrant parents didn't know what "GPA" stood for until Padilla, the first in her family to attend college, arrived at UCLA.

No one has to tell the Padillas what the letters mean now—Briana is graduating from UCLA in June with a degree in history and a GPA of 3.9.

Three years ago, Padilla, who grew up in an impoverished part of Los Angeles, had felt overwhelmed on her arrival at UCLA as a community college transfer student. At that point, she had considered dropping out; today, she is pondering her options for graduate school.

Padilla says that her remarkable turnaround could not have occurred without the support and guidance she received from the UCLA Academic Advancement Program (AAP).

AAP, which was created at UCLA 35 years ago, is the nation's largest and most successful university student retention program. While many universities launched similar initiatives to support affirmative action efforts in the 1970s, AAP has thrived with a redefined and expanded mis-

sion; today there is nothing comparable to UCLA's campus-wide investment in promoting academic excellence among diverse student populations.

"AAP's longevity attests to the program's excellence, as well as to the commitment of the university to supporting these efforts," said Charles Alexander, who came to

UCLA in 2006 as associate vice provost for student diversity and director of AAP.

There is much to be said for growing up in peer groups in which attending college is expected, and for having adult and older-sibling role models who have experienced university life and can provide a sense of what lies ahead. Four of every five UCLA students who are not in AAP have at least one parent with a college degree; among AAP students, that figure is one in four.

"When a lot of students are growing up, the question isn't whether they were going to go to college, but what college they are going to attend," said Padilla. "For my parents, seeing me graduate from high school represented a huge achievement. None of the friends I went to school with ended up going to a university. Growing up in an environment like that, your world seems very limited and it's hard to hold the belief that going to a university is a possibility."

Padilla enrolled in community college and excelled. But when she got to UCLA, her first sense was that she was in over her head.

# Creating Possibilities for Achievement

By Dan Gordon



“It seemed like such a foreign place, and I just didn’t feel I would be able to make it,” she said.

Padilla walked into the AAP office with the intention of dropping out, but was convinced to stay.

“They believed in me,” Padilla said. “They pointed me to the right resources on campus and provided mentors who helped me with the transition, both academically and socially.”

AAP promotes academic excellence and achievement through activities and services open to 6,600 UCLA undergraduates from populations that have been historically underserved by higher education. The program has a three-fold mission:

- Ensure the academic success, retention and graduation of AAP students;
- Increase the number of these students entering graduate and professional schools; and
- Develop the academic, political, scientific, economic and community leadership necessary to transform society in the 21st century.

The definition of diversity has broadened since AAP was established. Students are now considered eligible if their academic profiles and personal backgrounds place them at a disadvantage when it comes to their university experience. This encompasses students who come from low-income families, those who come from high schools with limited or no advanced placement courses, and those who are the first in their families to attend college. AAP also considers students who can document life challenges that don’t fit the established groups but nonetheless warrant admission.

Students whose initial applications to UCLA indicate that they qualify for AAP are welcomed into the program before they have enrolled in their first course. Annual Scholar Days bring recently accepted students and their families to campus for an information session on UCLA and AAP that features faculty, staff and current AAP students. Summer residential programs for incoming freshmen and transfers help to ease the transition and prepare students for their UCLA careers. Open houses in the first two weeks of the fall introduce AAP to students who couldn’t attend the Scholar Days or summer programs.

Once they settle into campus life, AAP students involve themselves in wide range of opportunities, includ-

ing academic and career advising, collaborative learning workshops and scholarships. Graduate mentors offer guidance on postsecondary education and careers. The Program Leading to Undergraduate Success (PLUS) provides a more intense nurturing environment for 200 entering freshmen aimed at helping them to become outstanding students. The McNair Research Scholars Program prepares junior and senior AAP students who are interested in pursuing Ph.D.’s through workshops, symposia and involvement with faculty researchers.

Originally housed in UCLA’s Student Affairs Office, AAP moved into the Division of Undergraduate Education in the mid-1980s as the program took on more of an academic focus. Today the goal is not simply to keep AAP members in school, but to help them flourish by offering proactive programs, encouraging students to set high standards, and ensuring that they take advantage of the full range of campus resources.

“AAP started as a very important retention program, focused on making sure students graduated,” said Judith L. Smith, vice provost for undergraduate education. “In the 1980s, the emphasis shifted from retention to promoting academic excellence, and since the 1990s we have been concentrating on ways to help students take the next big step. It is now a critical program that helps us to diversify graduate and professional schools.”

AAP alumni can be found in high positions throughout government, business and academics, Alexander notes.

“We are looking to produce leaders—academic, political, scientific and economic—from among groups that have historically not had full participation in higher education. Many of these individuals will ultimately return to their communities to make an impact.”

Alexander sees the sense of belonging fostered by AAP as a key element in the program’s success.

“To feel part of a community with other students from similar backgrounds instills a great deal of confidence,” he said. “We want to use that to challenge and inspire these students to take advantage of the wealth of resources here at UCLA, to become involved in university life, and to set high goals that they can achieve.”<sup>CR</sup>

[www.ugeducation.ucla.edu/aap](http://www.ugeducation.ucla.edu/aap)

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Photos courtesy AAP

