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ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



Interviewed by
Iliana Kleiner

Cindy Barrientos

Class of 2016 | B.S. in Physiology and Neuroscience & M.S. in Biology
Currently working as a Data Consultant
McNair Program Alum

Graduated in 2016 with a Bachelor's degree in Physiology and Neuroscience along with a Master's degree in Biology, Cindy Barrientos has always loved learning. As a child, she spent her time reading to expand her knowledge. She expressed that she often "romanticized the idea of being the first person to discover something." Ultimately, this aspiration led her to pursuing research as a college student.

She entered UC San Diego as a transfer student; thus, she wanted to be involved in a program that would allow her to make the most of her time at the university. After receiving her acceptance to the school, Barrientos applied to all the programs she was eligible for. Her acceptance into the McNair program— a program within the Undergraduate Research Hub (URH)—landed her a summer research position for the summer of 2014. She continued this research throughout her undergraduate career. This research was interested in how cocaine affects dendritic spine density within certain areas of the brain and how that correlates with addiction.

Following that summer, she continued working with the lab where she ultimately published her research for her Master's degree. Although her research didn't influence her career path, she was able to learn many transferable skills, such as being able to parse through research papers and critical thinking.

However, Barrientos did not always know she wanted to pursue a graduate degree. Not having any family members who worked in the STEM field, she did not have a plan for her future. However, the contiguous BS/MS program she was involved in pushed her to complete an additional year of school to get a graduate degree and help her get into a highly-regarded Ph.D. program, should she choose to pursue one. Barrientos is thankful for her degrees and time spent at school.

After graduating from UC San Diego, Barrientos worked at Irvine Scientific on their New Technologies Team. She helped the company develop new products it wanted to bring to the market. Through friends who also worked in the field, Barrientos learned that "in tech, the sky is the limit. You can learn anything that you want to do on your own time; all of the resources are out there." However, while she loved working on this team, she realized that she did not want to work in the BioTech industry in the long run. She "felt that doing BioTech was not really feasible to be learning quite as much or as frequently as [she] would like."

As a result, she navigated into working as a Data Consultant for RackSpace Technology, a cloud computing company. Barrientos explained that she loves this job because it allows her to do both technical work and interact with her clientele. As she reflects on her time at UC San Diego, Barrientos wishes that she found a better balance between her academic and social lives; she explained that as a student, she was academically and research-oriented, and therefore would have tried to have more fun as a young adult.

One piece of advice that Barrientos would give to students who are curious about doing research on campus is to find a graduate student or professor who may be willing to mentor them. She hopes that students find scientists who inspire them to get more involved in on-campus research and stay motivated while working. Most importantly, Barrientos wants students to understand that "there's a lot of things that can and will go wrong, but just don't forget that the research that you're doing and the discoveries you're uncovering could potentially save lives in the future. It's not negligible work."