



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Alex, a former Law and Society major who's now managing a multi-million dollar budget for UCSB's College of Letters and Science.



Alex Garcia:
Financial and Budget Analyst
UCSB

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

On the budgeting and finance side, I look at the trends of how our office spends money on salaries, supplies, programs, etc., then analyze how we can best allocate funds in coming years. I review the ledger every month and match it up with invoices, receipts, or payroll, and give a report to the deans so they can look at the trends. Then they decide where we should cut back on things or if we can afford to spend extra money on a program.

There's a lot of attention to detail and troubleshooting. I've literally spent two days trying to find a 13¢ difference in a ledger. When that happens, I have to go back to the beginning and review line by line to look for why the numbers don't add up. Sometimes it's as simple as a swapping of digits when I entered information. You

have to know when it's time to walk away and come back with a fresh set of eyes. But when every penny is accounted for, that's the best feeling in the world.

I also make sure transactions are paid from the right accounts, which is important because every expenditure has to be approvable under UC policy. Each account is limited to being used for specific kinds of things. And because most people don't fully understand that, sometimes they promise money that just isn't allowable with state funds or grant funds or scholarship money. I have to be fluent in UC policy so that if I have to explain to someone why they can't use money in a certain way, I can back it up with policy.

"The best advice I can give is: it's okay to fail."



I'm also the HR guru for the office. I post jobs, do all the hire paperwork, payroll, and I on-board all of our employees. For someone who's so into numbers, I really am a people-person. I enjoy when people come to me and ask about their benefits or maternity leave or to help track their vacation accruals because they're going to take a big trip.

My job is never the same—it fluctuates year to year. Financial forecasts change or the amount of money coming in. We're a non-profit government entity so we're given X amount of dollars and it's up to us to use it appropriately for all the needs that come up in a college office. There's a lot of variety.

How did you get to where you are?

I transferred to UCSB from Allan Hancock College as a Bio major. But compared to the semester system, the quarter system felt too fast. I was working forty hours a week at

Albertsons to pay for college and I was burning out. I went to CLAS to get tutoring, but with a hectic work schedule and not enough time to pick up the concepts, my grades were suffering. I was academically disqualified two quarters before I planned to graduate because I didn't have the grades in my major. I was talking to the associate dean who said, "There's got to be other things you're good at. Maybe you need to refocus." This was in fall and I couldn't come back until summer, so she told me to take those six months to save up money and think about my major direction.

I thought about other areas that interested me. I loved Political Science, I'm a news junkie, but I got particularly drawn to law. I looked at my transcripts and saw that I had a really solid base to move into Law and Society, a major that was offered then. When summer came around, I took as many Law and Society classes as I could. I got

straight As and graduated in the fall with that major.

That experience was a real eye-opener. I had kind of structured my mind to always be memorizing, regurgitating information, and explaining the basic ways things worked. But Law and Society was different. We would read case studies and be asked, "Do you think they went about it the right way? What's your opinion of the different points of view judges had on this case?" It was the first time I was told to bring my own voice to the table and defend my opinions.

While all this was going on academically, at work I was promoted to a management position. They'd pinned me as someone friendly who could explain things to people. They asked me to run an onboarding session, a new employee orientation. They gave me the basic script, a training on the paperwork to be filled out, and I started doing that. Before I knew

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it, I was doing the onboarding for all the stores in the Santa Barbara area. I really enjoyed it. So once I graduated, I applied to an HR assistant position at the UCSB library. My job was mostly HR-based. I was in charge of managing student employment budgets, but it was minimal compared to what I do now. After a while, I moved to the Institute for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research on campus. They managed contracts and grants—government contracts, private firm contracts, grants like National Endowment for the Arts, etc.—so I learned account management. With all that experience, I was a shoe-in for the full-fledged accounting job with Letters and Science. I didn’t even need to be a CPA.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

Getting kicked out of school. I’m dead serious. It helped me get out of my head and reevaluate the reason I was going to school. I’d thought I needed to stick with Bio because I’d started it. But once I realized that maybe it wasn’t for me or maybe I wasn’t doing as well as I could have if I did something else, I had to sit down with myself and

ask, “Alright, what am I really good at? What is it that I enjoy? What do I find rewarding?” And in moving toward the humanities, my mind expanded to learn to analyze, give ideas, and back up ideas. It’s a completely different experience.

How does that translate into what I do now? I’m an analyst. I’m constantly arranging ideas and coming up with concise arguments for why things are needed and why I need to do them a certain way. I’m glad to have had a major that taught me those skills.

What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

I remember this pressure to get my degree done quickly. Just check the boxes and get out. I wish I would have taken the time to explore other fields like anthropology or math. I wish I would have been told, “Explore everything. Here’s a menu of all your options and you don’t have to decide right away.” To undergrads now, try to ignore the pressure that comes from people demanding, “What do you want to be? What’s your major going to do for you?” When you’re 17 or 18, you

really don’t know. I would have valued resources like this one that showed there are many different ways you can use degrees. You want to be able to take your background and the strengths you acquired while studying and apply them to your current job, but your degree isn’t necessarily the field you’re going to go into. You could get a Law and Society degree and become an accountant. Personally, my major has never come up in a job interview and



“...take moments for [yourself] to balance out all of the hard work.”



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www.facebook.com/AskJoeGaucho

If an alum's story is meaningful to you, consider reaching out with questions using the contact information provided.

speaking from the HR side, for the types of positions we hire, I always want to see what experiences people have and how they've *applied* those skills they've learned in school.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

Thinking back on my time at UCSB, I remember riding my skateboard at 9pm, heading home after spending all day at the library. Going from being in my head, being indoors, cramming, studying, collaborating with other people, that skateboard ride alone at night in the crisp air, smelling the beach, was a nice way to unwind. I could take a moment to absorb where I was going to school, what was happening in my life at that moment, think about my friends, whatever I wanted to reflect on. It was a freeing feeling and reminded me to take moments for myself to balance out all of the hard work.

Any final words of wisdom for the

current Gaucho generation?

Don't be afraid to screw up. Don't do it on purpose, of course, but don't be so scared of making mistakes that it paralyzes you. I failed at the Biology program. I flunked out of school. But it resulted in a moment of awakening, this repurposing of my life and my goals. When you fail, step back and look at where you might have gone wrong, where things didn't click, and reevaluate your path. Then get back on. You might need to realize that Bio's not for everybody. Law and Society's not for everybody. Accounting isn't for everybody. Not everybody likes staring at numbers or being responsible for other people's money. So the best advice I can give is: it's okay to fail. Be comfortable with it and grow from it. Joe Biden said it best: "Failure at some point in your life is inevitable, but giving up is unforgivable."



Alex welcomes Gauchos to contact him via LinkedIn for questions about his career and path to get there. Requests to review resumes will not receive responses.

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