

Student Profile

Sabrina Solanki – Education PhD Program



Your Time at UCI

What made you decide to pursue a graduate degree?

Prior to graduate school, I was both an academic advisor and a public high school teacher for almost ten years. During this time, I had the opportunity to work with a diverse group of students. Even though both jobs were rewarding, I was impacted by the challenges the education system faces in educating all students equally. I also observed firsthand that a number of school efforts to improve student outcomes—particularly for underserved populations—rarely hit targeted goals. This motivated me, fueling a desire to better understand how the problems in our education system operate and, moreover, how institutions can implement and evaluate effective, evidence-based solutions.

Why did you choose to come to UCI?

I have a long history with UCI, having earned my MAT and MPP there. I have consistently been impressed by UCI's amazing faculty. They have a diverse set of backgrounds and interests and are extremely productive. More importantly, they are sincerely supportive and do a great job helping students develop their skills and achieve whatever academic/career goals are most important to them. This fact was especially important to me when I made a transition from the classroom to a career in educational research.

If you are conducting research, how would you explain your research and its significance to your grandparent?

My research focuses on ways that institutions can support student success and college persistence with the aim of facilitating improved academic and personal outcomes. My goal is to inform higher education administrators and practitioners so that institutions can improve the quality of education students receive and provide a better overall college experience that allows more students to reach the finish line.

I have often used large-scale longitudinal administrative datasets to focus on student-faculty relationships. My first paper, published in The American Educational Research Journal, uses such datasets to examine the impact of instructor gender on student motivation in STEM fields. I found that having a female instructor narrows the gender gap in terms of student engagement and interest, further finding that both female and male students tend to respond to instructor gender. More recently, I have been examining the growth and characteristics of different types of tenure-track faculty—specifically those that specialize in teaching. This study aims to shed light on the degree to which faculty characteristics and specializations are related to undergraduate learning outcomes.

I am also very interested in evaluating educational interventions and strategies that offer

holistic forms of student support. One of my dissertation chapters, for example, evaluates a STEM learning communities program that groups students into cohorts and co-enrolls these cohorts in first-year STEM courses, providing additional peer advisor and seminar support. I am also extending my intervention work beyond four-year institutions to include the community college sector, where issues of retention and persistence are often more severe.

What are your hobbies/passions outside of research?

I love both reading and writing fiction and taking long runs outdoors. If it's fall, however, I am usually indoors watching football!

Reflections

What are you most proud of accomplishing (so far) in your graduate program?

I am particularly proud of my first publication. The writing process was very challenging. I struggled each step of the way but received superior guidance from my UCI mentors. In this process, I grew in my own intellectual capacity and began to identify as a researcher, which gave me the confidence needed to persevere through the challenges that a Ph.D. program—and research itself—entails.

I am also very proud of receiving the NAEd/Spencer Dissertation Fellowship. This validated the work I do, and I feel fortunate that the mentorship I will receive through this fellowship will help me launch my career as an educational researcher.

What is your most memorable moment/experience at UCI to date?

I most value the numerous conversations I have had with my peers. Their experiences, knowledge, and support have helped me grow intellectually.

What advice do you have for a new graduate student in your program?

The School of Education has many opportunities for getting involved in research with amazing scholars. My advice is to solidly identify a research interest and/or path, take advantage of these opportunities, and not lose heart when research becomes frustrating; by the end of the program, it is important to demonstrate that you have been productive.

Career

What do you see yourself doing in five or ten years?

I see myself being an established educational researcher and expert in my field, collaborating with intelligent and innovative researchers and conducting rigorous research with the goal of improving the college experience for students in all sectors of higher education. Regardless of where my work takes me, I definitely see myself remaining committed to applied research and working in conjunction with practitioners in developing, implementing, and assessing practices and strategies that aim to improve the learning outcomes of students.