

How did community colleges change how you thought and felt about your future?

My community college experience has been nothing short of transformative. It all began when I first arrived in America almost a year ago, a refugee with a three-letter name that hardly anyone could pronounce. I felt insecure about my identity; while I may not have looked like the stereotypical “refugee,” my voice gave it away. Assimilation was difficult when I knew nobody except for the names of two pop star singers: Britney Spears and Madonna. It was hard to believe I had a bright future, even when the person sitting next to me on my 12-hour flight told me how I had endless possibilities coming for me and that I had to “look for them” instead of “wait for them to come to me.” My problem wasn’t that I lacked dreams and aspirations for myself; in fact, I believed in my dreams then as much as I do today. But back then, my 17-year-old self had to “believe” in pragmatic issues like rent and finding a job.

Promises were also made, to my grandparents, my parents, and my cat. One promise was for Lucy, the stray cat I adopted, whom we had to leave home due to the high cost of bringing an animal abroad. Before I left, I told her, in intense stares and high-pitched meows, which likely translated into gibberish, that when I get a job, I would save my money and buy her a ticket to come live with us again. Unsurprisingly, it was hard to find a good job with little to no experience. Considering this reality, I put my education first and chose to attend a community college. And considering San Jacinto College’s proximity, positive reviews, varied diversity, and high graduation rates for Hispanic minorities, I ended up enrolling there. This final factor would be my deal breaker. If they care about marginalized students, odds are, they care about me too. I majored in Natural Sciences, a decision I am happy with, as sciences are truly my passion. And thus, my college experience had finally begun.

A “Career and Services Department” poster was my first exposure at campus. The red coloured and big-lettered “Career” caught my attention. Despite relying on refugee assistance initially, our resources were limited. With my parents unable to cover rent expenses, I needed to find a job. I met with a staff member who works there—for her privacy, let’s call her “Cecelia”—who, after hearing my story, recommended all the resources her office provided. Starting with one-on-one resume building, Cecelia was able to identify small skills and experiences I already possessed that meant something to an employer. She also provided me with mock interviews, which helped me prepare in advance for future interviews. Lastly, she introduced me to a San Jacinto College-owned website called “San Jac Works,” which helps connect students with campus jobs and internships.

But even with the help of Cecelia, my lack of experience was still an issue. I decided to seek out more resources to help me become a better applicant. Taking the advice of that old lady who sat next to me on the airplane, I searched for more opportunities—starting with leadership. But I had no idea where to begin, so I reached out to an advisor who recommended I sign up for clubs, which she had to explain, as the concept was quite foreign for me. I remember when I got back home, I highlighted seven clubs I wanted to join on the printed list she gave me. I ended up becoming a member of four: the International Student Organization, a safe community to share their experiences and learn about different cultures; the Transfer Association Club, which helped me understand the complexities of transferring; the Creative Writing Club, a group of supportive students who not only helped me write better but also speak better; and the Honors Club, where I met some of my closest friends.

In those times, I learnt a ton from simply attending meetings. I would take notes of how students my age and younger would host and manage other students. And with more exposure

and responsibility, I felt more secure in myself—secure enough to run for Vice President in my honors club. To my delight, I was elected! Then I got involved with PTK, an honors society for two-year college students, and I managed to land a position there. My involvement in these organizations introduced me to more resources, including the Food Marketplace, a market that offers free groceries, and where I occasionally volunteer to help, and the Café Assistance Program, which offers free monthly purchases at the Café. Both programs help low-income students, including me, to stress less about food management and more on getting their degrees. Finally, after time and experience, I was ready to apply for a campus job, a Biology Lab Assistant position. And, with the tips given to me by Cecelia, along with the newly established confidence, I landed the position!

San Jacinto College offers a wealth of resources; however, discovering them all can be challenging for both new students and those who haven't had the opportunity to explore them thoroughly. That is why I decided to open a club of my own—the Network Club—to help students as oblivious as I was with networking and finding opportunities by simply having a conversation with another student. Even if a connection wasn't made, they could still get to make a friend who could possibly be of some help in the future. Personally, I will connect students with the resources that shaped my journey at San Jacinto College. This includes the monthly transfer trips, the weekly events from which I got free professional headshots and a first aid certificate, the financial literacy videos offered by financial aid, the accessible tutoring services for a range of courses on weekdays at the Library, the low-cost haircuts at the cosmetology building, the San Jac Laptop Loaner Program, which allows students to borrow an affordable computer, and the mentorship program that connects mentors to students. Through this program,

I personally got to meet my mentor, Dr. Teddy Farias, the Dean of Health and Natural Sciences.

Finally, there's the free mental health counseling that helped me cope with the death of Lucy.

While I arrived in America with the aspiration of becoming a doctor, I questioned the feasibility of this path. The obstacles ahead left me feeling anxious and uncertain. I lacked confidence, felt afraid, and had no connections or friends to lean on. However, my community college provided invaluable support, and I firmly believe I wouldn't be here today, writing this essay, if I hadn't seized the opportunities offered by my college. I am deeply grateful, and I aspire to give back to my community and fellow students in whatever way I can.

- Aws Alezzi