

Valerie Acevedo: Creating a Holistic Application¹

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On an early fall morning, Valerie Acevedo ran by the banks and grocery stores in downtown Fullerton, keeping her mind focused on the things she needed to accomplish that week. Her daily 10 mile route kept her involved in the cross-country sport she loved and also gave her time to think about the next steps in the application process for graduate school. This week she wanted to finalize her list of potential programs and contact her possible recommenders. Juggling her research for an advanced degree while working for AmeriCorps was a lot to do, but the flexibility of her job allowed her the time she needed to really explore her options. As she came to a stop, Valerie pulled out her water bottle for a drink and checked her time. “Not bad,” she thought, “considering I’ve been so busy.”

As an undergraduate at Cal State Fullerton, Valerie had also kept a full schedule. She was a student athlete and competed at the Division I level, worked as a coach and a coaching assistant, and also pursued leadership roles in student organizations that gave her experience in governance and policy. She had travelled to Spain once she graduated, then returned to work for AmeriCorps VISTA, taking on a position as the College and Career Center Coordinator at the New Vision Academy in San Bernardino, California. Valerie felt that her own life experiences and the obstacles she had overcome to succeed in academia made her an excellent role model for younger students who were struggling in school and weren’t sure how to gain access to college. The availability of higher education, in fact, and the broader topic of educational policy was what Valerie wanted to address in pursuing her graduate degree.

Over the last two months, Valerie had compiled a list of five programs that looked promising and now she was considering adding a couple more possibilities. Her responsibility at the New Vision Academy was to create a mentorship program specifically aimed at providing foster youth and undocumented immigrant students with better access to higher education. Valerie was a little concerned that her GPA and

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standardized test score for the GRE would hinder her chances of admission to an advanced degree program. She hoped that providing context would help the admissions committees see her commitment and dedication so Valerie spent some time deciding how her essays could showcase her significant work experience, international travel and the leadership roles she had taken on during her undergraduate education.

Growing Up

When Valerie was three years old, she went to live with her grandparents because her parents could not continue to provide a stable home life. Later, when her grandfather passed away, her aunt and uncle offered to share custody and Valerie, her brothers, and their grandmother moved in with her aunt's family. Valerie's extended household taught her responsibility through regular chores and gave her the support she needed to excel in school and compete in sports. The family religion also provided a moral foundation.

New Experiences at Cal State Fullerton

Valerie chose to attend Cal State Fullerton for two important reasons. She wanted to stay close to her family and CSUF participated at NCAA Division I, allowing Valerie to compete in cross-country at the highest intercollegiate level. She decided to major in anthropology during a summer session course at Chaffey College. "I really enjoyed learning about different cultures and studying human behavior," Valerie said. "I also considered studying sociology, nursing, Spanish, kinesiology and political science, but felt that anthropology would be more all-encompassing."

Valerie took on a number of extra-curricular activities at CSUF that helped her get involved with helping others and provided opportunities to become engaged in leadership. As a junior, Valerie participated in the Alliance of Students for Equal Education, an advocacy group for undocumented immigrant students on campus. She also became a member of the Latin American Studies Student Association, a club that promoted Latin American culture and helped to teach the campus community about issues pertaining to that region. Eventually, she served as president of that organization, a position that involved working as a representative for the Association for Intercultural Awareness, an advocacy council that helped allocate funds for all of the cultural organizations on campus. These experiences helped Valerie develop negotiation skills and diplomacy as there were always many decisions to be made regarding campus life. In addition, Valerie had a paid position as an assistant to the coordinator of the Latin American Studies Department.

Valerie's family was unconditionally supportive of her desire to attend college, but left the financial aspects of her education up to her to handle. To help with the costs of tuition, Valerie leveraged her athletic skills and worked as an assistant track and field coach at a local high school, in addition to all her campus involvements. "The job was demanding," she said, "because I had to commute to the high school everyday." Then when she got in a traffic accident, the challenges mounted. "The car accident created a financial burden for me," Valerie said, "creating additional stress and, unfortunately, a downturn in my academic work."

Staying on for an Extra Year

As her senior year approached, Valerie realized that she had an important decision to make. “I discovered I had enough financial aid that I could stay for an additional fifth year of school,” she said. “And I also found out I would still be eligible to compete as a college athlete.” After thinking about it for a while, she made the decision to remain a student as it would allow her time to enjoy her time in college, explore some alternative educational and career goals and determine her next steps post-graduation. That fifth year turned out to be an important period as she was able to improve her grades, spend time doing extracurricular activities, and also participate in organizations to which she was committed. At the end of her fifth year, Valerie was the first person in her family to complete a college degree.

Spain and AmeriCorps

It was during this final year that a friend told Valerie about ESL teaching programs in Spain. “I had always wanted to travel,” she said, “and leaving after I finished my degree seemed to be perfect timing as I was ready for a change.” Saying goodbye to her family for the first time, Valerie moved to a small, poor rural town called Calahorra in the region of La Rioja where she was an English Language Assistant for the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport. She worked at two primary schools, taught private English lessons, and for herself, arranged an informal Spanish lesson with native speakers each day to ensure she improved her own language abilities. During weekends she traveling with friends to many cities on the eastern side of Spain, enjoying her free time and also developing an understanding of the history, culture and language of the country. On longer holiday breaks, Valerie travelled alone to Paris, Berlin, and Rome. These experiences helped Valerie develop independence, cultivated a greater understanding of cultural diversity, and brought an understanding of some of the challenges of European life.

When she returned to California, Valerie signed on with VISTA AmeriCorps so that she could continue to do meaningful work while exploring more career opportunities. Her goal was to gain experience as a resource developer in education and AmeriCorps provided the perfect opportunity with a job as the College and Career Center Coordinator at New Vision Academy in San Bernardino, California. She knew AmeriCorps’ solid reputation and partnership with local universities would help her chances of getting into a good advanced degree program. Working with AmeriCorps offered her a small living stipend and also, once she had completed her appointment, funding she could use to either pay off undergraduate debts or towards graduate school tuition.

Moving on to Grad School

Once Valerie made the decision to return for a graduate degree, she began to look for public policy and educational policy programs in California. She wanted to be close to her family and staying in state would help mitigate the costs of moving and traveling home to see them.

Valerie found many programs in which she had an interest and made a goal of visiting the programs close to her home. She wanted to ensure that she started a graduate program in the fall so she was willing to spend a great deal of time exploring various programs and preparing the complicated application materials. While she struggled to stay organized at times during this period, she was able to follow a process which helped her stay on top of everything by creating file folders for each school and a general spreadsheet with deadlines, requirements, the names of people she had talked with, dates of information sessions and other pertinent materials.

Valerie's ultimate goal was to serve as a role model to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and she felt she had a lot to offer. In her AmeriCorps job she saw many students of high potential struggling simply because they did not have the resources, cultural know-how or family support. As she worked on her Statement of Purpose and Personal History (or an essay that combined the two, depending on what the program required), she made sure to write compelling narratives that highlighted her achievements and work experience, the leadership roles she had taken on, and her dedication to education and policy. (See **Exhibits A and B**) She also submitted an addendum that explained the inconsistencies with her GPA and test scores when applications permitted submitting additional information. (See **Exhibit C**)

Valerie applied to eight different university programs including a Masters in Public Policy at USC, UCLA, UC Irvine, Mills College and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. She applied to a Masters in Education Policy at UC Davis and at UCSB, and a Masters in Education Policy, Evaluation and Reform at Claremont Graduate University.

She worked hard on each application, allowing herself enough time to include a small section within her statement of purpose on the faculty with whom she wanted to study, and the particular aspects of each program that she felt were most appropriate to her stated career aspirations.

Exhibit A: Statement of Purpose for UC Irvine

For the last seven years I have worked in the field of education in various capacities, always with a focus on helping students from disadvantaged families. Due to my own background as an independent student who had a good experience in the California foster care system, I know that supportive services can be beneficial. This motivates me to want to address educational and economic inequities, and my current research with AmeriCorps is focused on helping students from low-income communities find solutions for better college access. I would like to continue my research in this area with the goal of contributing to educational policy.

My teaching and advocacy work began during my undergraduate years when I assisted Anthropology professor, Dr. Sara Johnson, and helped jump-start the U-Acre research program that focused on urban gardening in local community facilities. With training provided by a professional biologist in the school's arboretum, I learned to teach junior high school students how to develop a sustainable form of sustenance to reduce food insecurity through a school garden I helped construct. During this time, I also participated as an AB540 advocate with members from the Alliance of Students for an Equal Education. This experience inspired me to write and present to my class a policy brief called The Dreamers Essay, an informative discussion of the impact of education and legislation pertaining to the undocumented immigrant student population.

Nearing graduation, I decided to stay in school for a fifth year, a decision that allowed me to continue my collegiate career as a track and field athlete and to explore educational interests not directly related to my major. This was a turning point in my educational and work life as learning to juggle athletic training, school, work, and difficult family issues really taught me what it means to be disciplined and focused. I enrolled as a full-time student and worked part-time as a writing tutor at the Reading and Writing Center at Riverside Community College in Riverside, California and as a program leader for a non-profit after school enrichment program called Think Together in Ontario, California. While working in these two positions, I learned skills in one-on-one facilitation and classroom management that enabled me to better help many struggling students.

Post graduation, I wanted to improve my Spanish language skills so I moved to Spain to work as an English Language Assistant for the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport. I was placed in a small, poor rural town called Calahorra in the region of La Rioja. I worked at two primary schools, taught private lessons and arranged an informal Spanish lesson each day with native speakers to ensure my improvement. This work led to my current position as the AmeriCorps VISTA College and Career Center Coordinator at New Vision Academy in San Bernardino, California, where I am creating a mentorship program specifically aimed to provide foster youth and undocumented immigrant students with better access to college.

My research interest in educational policy emerges out of my work in education and I'm particularly interested in research with students from disadvantaged backgrounds where parental mental health issues are involved. Growing up in foster care, I knew many young people whose educational success was affected by their parents' mental illness and I am

interested in exploring policy solutions. I believe my research would fit well with other work being done in the UCI public policy program by Dr. Thurston Domina and Dr. Maria G. Rendon. I am interested in Dr. Domina's work focusing on student transitions from middle and high school into higher education. Dr. Rendon's research in the sociology of education and social policy examines issues similar to my own concerns. I believe working with these professors would be helpful and I would benefit greatly from their mentoring.

My motivation to return to graduate school is prompted by the students I see struggling everyday. As a former ward of the court, I am fully aware of the consequences of inadequate support and I want to ensure that all students' academic needs are met. I believe earning a degree in public policy at UCI will allow me to gain valuable training in research, develop my leadership skills, and improve my understanding of policy in order to make significant contributions to remedy these pressing social issues.

Exhibit B: Personal History for UC Irvine

As a foster youth, I faced many challenges during my high school years but had a mostly stable life because I was placed with relatives. I was successful in gaining admission to a four-year university, but struggled financially to fund my undergraduate education. During college, I worked part-time as an assistant track and field and cross-country coach at Upland High School and as a student assistant to the coordinator of the Latin American Studies Department at CSUF. It was also necessary to borrow funding from my extended family and take out loans. Fortunately, I did well in my studies and my brother and I are the first in our family to graduate college.

At CSU Fullerton, I was able to take a campus leadership role, serving as president of the Latin American Studies Student Association for academic year 2010-2011. During this time, in addition to my duties as president, I also served as the organization's representative to the Association for InterCultural Awareness (AICA), a broader based organization that serves as a campus instrument of student opinion, multicultural leadership, diversity education, and advocacy. AICA has the important responsibility of allocating Associated Students Inc. (ASI) funds to member organizations to provide multicultural programming.

My participation in this organization included creating event budget proposals, advocating for pressing social issues on campus and in the larger society and educating fellow student members and the community about various issues of importance in Latin American culture. I also collaboratively organized a number of major events including the "Rally Against Hate," "MultiCultural Taste," and "Culture Couture." These events helped us spread awareness about hate crimes and also promoted open-minds toward cultural foods and fashions that are represented by many CSU Fullerton students. My most important contribution to AICA and the Fullerton campus was leading and coordinating the annual Latin American Studies Student Conference, enabling students across many disciplines to present research on various topics related to Latin America. As a graduate student at UCI, I hope to find ways to participate in a similar organization or make a contribution to students' awareness of multi-cultural issues in other ways.

Thereafter, during my studies at Riverside Community College (RCC), I wanted to focus on continuing to improve my English writing skills. I enrolled in a Business English course and a Writing Tutor Training course. These two classes helped me better understand the language and led to my employment as a writing tutor at the Reading and Writing Center. I worked with students from classes in Beginners College writing, remedial-level, ESL, and also assisted students with disabilities. This experience exposed me to the challenges that many of these junior college students face and allowed me to gain experience with helping them improve their writing skills.

While enrolled at RCC, I also participated as a track and field athlete. After experiencing injury the first season, I filed as a medical red-shirt, attended rehabilitation training, and returned the following season to perform well beyond my expectations. I finished my track and field career competing at the California Community College Championship

Meet in San Mateo, California in May 2013. I ran a personal record in both the 5,000 and 10,000 meter race placing 6th and 4th in each event.

During my studies at RCC, I worked at Think Together as the STEM Program Leader and continued in this position after completing my collegiate running career. During the June 2013 summer program, I was selected to be one of six program leaders from our region to work at the Ontario-Montclair School District Summer Science Academy hosted at Vina Danks Middle School in Ontario, California. We worked with teachers to help students from 3rd through 8th grade learn to use critical thinking skills to build various modes of transportation with minimal resources. The Academy partnered with representatives from JPL, UCR, the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools Office, and the Alliance for Education. This experience taught me the importance and need for more science programs specifically dedicated to minority-based educational institutions.

My acceptance to work as a language assistant for the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport then took me to La Rioja, Spain. I worked at two primary schools, an experience which opened my eyes to different educational systems. The Spanish educational system encourages an equal opportunity at success by integrating students of all abilities into one classroom. During weekends I was able to develop my understanding of the history, culture and language of the country by traveling with friends to many cities on the eastern side of Spain. On holiday breaks, I travelled alone to Paris, Berlin, and Rome. This experience helped me develop independence and taught me about the beauty in diversity, as well as exposing me to some of the challenges of the European-life experience.

I returned to work with AmeriCorps VISTA to further my interest and understanding of educational issues, and particularly the students who I see struggling everyday. As the College and Career Center Coordinator at New Vision Academy in San Bernardino, California, I have held monthly college information workshops for students and parents, college and career day events and developed systems of fundraising. Currently, I am working to develop a mentorship program aimed at providing undocumented immigrant and foster youth students with better access to college. I am also conducting surveys throughout the year, researching methods to develop curriculum for sustainable programming.

My intention in returning to graduate school is to increase my expertise in educational policy and improve my abilities to help disadvantaged students. I have faced many obstacles in my own quest for higher education yet have found I am resilient in approaching difficult family problems and taking care of financial needs. Given my own resourcefulness, I believe I can serve as a role model to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and my graduate education will provide the necessary tools and expertise to make a difference in their lives.

Exhibit C: Addendum

In this addendum to my application, I would like to address some aspects of my educational record. In winter 2013, I took a macroeconomics course and received a substandard grade, however, I do not think this is a good indication of my abilities in the subject matter. Unfortunately, I purchased the wrong textbook and realized my mistake approximately two weeks after the start of the quarter when the questions on my second quiz did not cover the content of the assigned readings. The first quiz was focused on content from a supplemental booklet so I did not notice the mistake at that time. When I addressed the mistake with my professor, she assured me that the textbook would be okay to continue using since the content is very similar. However, after doing poorly on my last few quizzes even with adequate preparation, I noticed some of the assigned chapter readings of the textbook were in a different order. When I brought this issue to her attention, she informed me that offering an alternative to improve my grade would not be possible due to the short time remaining in the quarter. I also did not do well in a Spanish class I took in spring 2012. However, this only made me more determined to improve my language skills. This was the motivation for my living and working in Spain and I now speak and write Spanish at an advanced level. Lastly, I did not do well on the GRE and I have historically not done well on standardized tests. I hope that I will be assessed on my overall educational record and my grades, as well as my dedicated work experience and letters of recommendation. I believe these aspects of my application are a better indication of my commitment to advanced degree work and the ability to succeed in a Masters degree program.