

Tutoring, the way toward academic success



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Students discuss experiences as tutors

Joanne Newens was eating lunch at Blaze Pizza one day when an employee approached her and asked if she was a tutor at UC Davis. Newens was touched at the person's comments, as they mentioned that Newens was recognizable as the person who helped them get through one of their tough finals. It's moments like these where Newens truly feels like becoming a tutor for the Academic Assistance and Tutoring Center (AATC) was the perfect fit for her.

"The comment that always warms my heart when tutoring is when they ask what times I tutor, so they can come visit me to ask me questions," Newens, a second-year neurobiology, physiology and behavior major said in an email. "This comment shows me that I am doing something right in my job. I am considering changing my future plans because of my year as a tutor. I love teaching, and I love being kept on my toes by answering new questions. I am considering graduate school because I now hope to become a professor!"

Newens tutors MAT17 (calculus for biology students), but the AATC offers tutoring services across the board including other classes, such as math, chemistry, econ, physics, statistics and even writing. The AATC was formerly known as the Student Academic Success Center, or SASC, which is what many upperclassmen might recognize it as today.

According to Inez Anders, the director of tutoring services in the AATC, the number of tutors remains around 250 students at any time of the school year. The AATC also employs a handful of student assistants as well as a tutor specialist.



“The tutors support all of the drop-in tutoring and all of the things that we do,” Anders said. “Then the people who help support the tutoring program [are] our student assistants. They do lots of the scheduling things that happen, they do lots of the reschedules, they respond to a lot of the emails, so they essentially do a lot of the admin work that helps the tutoring program run.”

Although they don’t do the tutoring, the student assistants are integral in the functioning of the AATC. Ilona Salim, a second-year food science major, is one of four student assistants at the AATC, and she is responsible for rescheduling when people miss their appointments. Other student assistants help with scheduling individual tutoring, the hiring process and promotional outreach.

Nick Cumpian, the tutor specialist at AATC, is in charge of managing the hiring and recruitment of tutors at the center, as well as managing training and working closely with the lead tutor.

“I usually keep tutors in the loop with the big interactive strategies that we use here to improve tutoring and maintain a high level of tutoring,” said Cumpian, who graduated in 2017. “I’m also in charge of actually scheduling all the tutors that work in the drop in rooms, scheduling finals tutoring, reaching out to different organizations who then speak to Inez and then Inez lets me know [what] we need to offer this upcoming quarter. Then I’ll collect all the individual schedules from each one of our tutors, and from each of these I go and I schedule their drop-in and things like that.”

It’s no wonder Cumpian needs some help from the student assistants when it comes to scheduling the tutors’ work schedules and individual tutoring, as Cumpian notes that, on average, 300 students receive individual tutoring from the available tutors a quarter.

Sometimes a student comes to the AATC requesting tutoring for an obscure class, in which case the AATC has to seek out a student who fulfills the qualifications of becoming a tutor and is willing to take on the job.

“Like ARE 155, we had a hard time, for example, trying to fill that order specifically because it’s hard to find upper div students that [...] have taken the course and are still going to UC Davis to work as an undergrad tutor,” Cumpian said. “Typically we send those emails out because we’re looking for somebody who has the grade in that class, has the GPA, all that stuff, hoping somebody will apply and then we can interview them and move on.”

This was how Kimberly Tanaka, a fifth-year biomedical engineering and computer science double major, joined the AATC. She received an email asking if she wanted to tutor, and since spring 2016, has been tutoring thermodynamics and the physics 9 series.

“Of course you need to know the subject a little bit, but sometimes we don’t know the answers so sometimes it’s this fun journey of like, ‘hey, let’s figure out the answer together’ and getting to pass along some of the skills that’s helped you along the way,” Tanaka said. “Often the students know more than they think they do, and sometimes tutoring is giving them that extra boost of confidence of like, ‘hey, you’re on the right track, let’s correct it a little bit, but you’re on the right track’.”

Another aspect of AATC is providing tutors for programs that pay for special student services. For example, the athletics department pays to have tutors from the AATC hold special tutoring sessions to support the academic success of athletes on campus.

One of these programs is the Biology Undergraduate Scholars Program (BUSP), which serves students with a strong interest in undergraduate research in biology. After witnessing the passion and knowledge of a BUSP tutor in his freshman year — someone he saw more definitively as a mentor — Matthew Culberson was inspired to become a tutor himself.

“Seeing him [teach], that was something where I was like ‘wow’ and I did well in the class, in chemistry,” said Culberson, who just graduated last quarter with a degree in biochemistry and molecular biology. “He said, ‘I want you to be a tutor’ and I already wanted to be a tutor, so it matched up, so ever since the end of freshman year, I’ve been tutoring. I was hired to be a BUSP chemistry tutor, and then from there, I was able to apply to the [general] AATC tutoring program.”

Culberson tutors for general chemistry and organic chemistry. Since he’s not a student anymore, he finds his weeks filled with tutoring work. He doesn’t mind though and in fact loves the feeling of purpose he gets from the job and the relationships he’s built in his past four years as a tutor.

“The little joke I have all the time is, ‘I’m leaving this quarter, so you have to be the next tutor and replace me,’” Culberson said. “I’ve found people [like my tutor did with me], but some people don’t feel like they’re good enough, or they say, ‘I get this, but I don’t know how to explain it.’ But I always encourage people. It’s an excellent experience to be able to stand up there in front of people and get a random question asked at you. It’s a good skill to learn how to think on your feet and analyze questions.”

Another student who absolutely loves tutoring is Anika Agrawal, a third-year environmental toxicology major. After having found that her job at the library was not quite for her, she was ecstatic when she received an email at the end of her freshman year asking if she wanted to be a tutor.

“I love it, it’s great,” Agrawal said. “Recently somebody asked me, ‘what is, aside from doing school, one thing that gives you joy?’ And I love tutoring. After awhile the same people come in at the same times. They learn your quirks or you learn theirs. It’s just like a ten-weeks lived relationship with these people.”

As seems to be a common interest amongst all these tutors, Agrawal loves teaching others and witnessing progress. She has developed a unique teaching style of using positive reinforcement and lots of analogies. Instead of talking about hydrogen and oxygen, Agrawal will paint a picture using everyday concepts like flour and sugar that goes into baking a cake.

“I would love to be the Enderle of whatever the new age of chemistry is at my university, that would be really fun just to get more people excited about it,” Agrawal said. “I’m a very excitable person, and [love] making everybody really excited. Even if I could get like five more people excited about science, I’ve done something right.”

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