

Andy Suarez runs a Lab of Misfit Toys. That's why, when no other labs were bringing in Newton, an undergraduate Anthropology student from Jamaica with a less than desirable GPA, Suarez reached out.

"When I graduated from undergraduate school, I did not have a 3.0 GPA," says Suarez, who knows what it's like to struggle with graduate school rejections. "Grades and GRE scores almost never predict success." Newton hadn't applied himself early on in his undergraduate career, and he needed research opportunities to set him up for graduate school. So Suarez brought him on board.

"After 2 years, he went from having no research experience to completing a research project," says Suarez. "He gave a fantastic presentation at our university undergraduate symposium – it was as good as or better than some of my graduate students at the time." And if that's not impressive enough, Suarez notes the turnaround in Newton's application to his studies. "He would work longer hours than some of my graduate students towards the end," recalls Suarez. "And despite the fact that he did have some trouble getting into graduate school, including a number of rejections, he did get accepted into the Evolutionary Anthropology program at Cal State Fullerton."

Suarez considers his lab to be generally successful. He keeps it populated with a range of undergraduate, graduate, and post-doc students, many of which come from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. And with diversity, knows Suarez, comes different approaches. "A student's background, regardless of that background, is going to influence the way they come into a lab," he says. And according to him, that may be the best part.

"No two students are alike," says Suarez. "My grad school advisor had a very cookie-cutter approach. I think many of his students were so successful is because we were afraid of him." But, he adds, that mentoring through fear is not his style. "There's no way I could do it," he laughs. Instead, Suarez relies on communication to discover which students are more independent, and which students require a bit of hand holding. "Students respond differently to pressure," says Suarez, recalling what his first few graduate students taught him about mentoring. "What worked evolved over time."

But for all of his students, Suarez encourages consistent meetings. "I'm busy," he admits, "and I'm going to do everything in my power to avoid those meetings. I don't mean to. But it's up to the students to make sure we do meet every other week." This is how Suarez discovers his students' styles – some will push for regularly scheduled meetings, where others will take a more relaxed approach and only schedule appointments when they're stuck.

Regardless of style, Suarez has certain expectations of his students. They are required to present their research at least once per semester, and he encourages them to set small, realistic goals to help them see progress along the way. They are

also expected to celebrate each other's successes, therefore keeping jealousy at a minimum and collaboration at peak height. "A successful environment is one where students both work hard and play hard," Suarez advises.

In regards to his success with Newton, Suarez knows what he did right. "Instead of letting him give up, I hired him as a part-time lab assistant for the summer. Now he's co-author on a paper we're in the process of submitting and he's been accepted into graduate school. It's about creating an environment where he felt that he was successful, and that he was encouraged to never give up."

"I provided an opportunity," says Suarez, "and that was the single most important thing."