Pursuing a bachelor’s degree is a difficult endeavor, according the CSUS newsroom only 26% of California State University Students can complete theirs within four years. Attending graduate school takes another step up in both difficulty, and concentration. It is an experience that requires support, dedication, and a passion for science. For the last year of my undergraduate education, I will be building an academic support structure and learning healthy habits that will allow me to achieve everything I hope to during that time.

When I transferred to California State University, Sacramento I was not planning on attending graduate school after I finished, however, that changed when I took statistics of big data with Dr Fitzgerald. He had received his PhD from UC Davis and taught that course with an emphasis on sound research methodologies. During his office hours after discussing that day’s lecture, I inquired about graduate school programs at the end of the semester I applied for a student research position with him. Although it was only a semester, I realized how much I enjoyed academic work and looked for other programs that would allow me to gain more experience.

This search is what lead me to the McNair program, it prepares undergraduate students for their master's degree or doctorate by funding and guiding them through their own project. Through this program I learned how to conduct scholarly research under the guidance of Dr Fitzgerald. The topic I chose to pursue applied computer vision to cleaning up litter, which I was inspired to investigate after finding a pile of plastic bottles, broken glass, and fishing gear miles in the wilderness of the Sierras. Finding so much trash in a place that was supposed to be pristine opened my eyes to the environmental destruction improper waste management is causing.

Once I found my focus it was time to start building habits to become a lifelong scholar. The best habit, that I will always need to focus a parge portion of my time to, is reading. Whether it’s scholarly articles or non-fiction books reading is a way to expand my knowledge of the world in a meaningful way. It’s also the only way to understand a specific topic with enough depth to add to the field. I am also working on becoming the type of person who always asks questions, and seeks the answer. Maintaining curiosity is key to enjoying my time learning and studying science.

Besides building good habits, going forward I will need to keep a strong support structure to stay motivated in the long term. I have recently made new friends who are also interested in graduate school and research, it’s very encouraging to have others going through the same difficulties that I am. My mentor has been a strong area of support and I want to continue building that relationship even after our professional relationship ends. I am looking forward to my senior year which I will be entering with as a confident scholar hoping to make the most of my time. For my department I am required to work with a group of students on an outside project, I will hopefully convince them that we can write about our findings and attempt to publish them. My unique experiences have shaped how I resolve conflict and resolve self-doubt and I need to continue that grow that I have made in my undergraduate experience into my doctoral program.

https://www.csus.edu/news/newsroom/stories/2021/11/graduation-rates.html