

UCLA Admissions Committee,

I didn't feel comfortable with leaving Spain to study abroad until I was in my senior year when it was already too late to leave. However, my sudden burning desire to leave my country made me extend my undergraduate studies for one year. I applied to the TASSEP program, and my good grades assured me of a place in my most preferred university: UNC. I decided to take the opportunity even further and started looking for professors at UNC that could offer me a research position in their laboratory. I messaged all the professors in the Astronomy department and ended up choosing Dr. Sheila Kannappan as my research advisor because we had similar research interests.

When the school year started, and I arrived at Sheila's office, she offered me two research projects to choose from. After her briefing on each of them, I still had no idea what either of the projects were about. I was amazed at how the same obscure jargon at the beginning of the year sounded so natural a couple of months later. It took asking questions, reading papers, fighting with Python, learning Vim, and dealing with English to get familiar with my project. I like to compare my research experience to when I was a baby. Everything was new to me, and I learned new things very quickly. Nevertheless, I got stuck in some aspects: I found it particularly challenging to communicate my questions to Sheila, because my project was very technical, therefore the questions I had were often subtle. Nevertheless, I overcame this challenge by persevering on the practice of formulating complex questions. Halfway through the fall term, I predicted I was not going to have time to finish my project in just one semester. Consequently, I contacted my university in Spain and asked them if I could extend my program to one year. After many emails and visa appointments, I arranged everything to stay at UNC until the end of the year. In the end, my project was graded with an A, the highest score UNC awards. I also presented it as my final thesis in my home university, and it was awarded 9/10.

Overall, I consider my first research experience in the US to be my biggest academic challenge so far. Overcoming it made me grow academically and personally. Academically, I learned how to communicate complex ideas and questions to my supervisor in a language that was not my native language; to present my results to people from outside the field; taught myself python and other tools such as VIM and GitHub. On a personal level, I learned that obstacles will always appear in research, and the beauty of science is to be tenacious and come up with solutions to them. I learned to be transparent and honest about my ignorance and questions. I understood that if we are aware of our lack of knowledge, and we are passionate enough to fill it with new concepts, we can begin to understand the world around us.