

DISCUSSING UNDERGRADUATE SUMMER RESEARCH & GRADUATE SCHOOL WITH YOUR FAMILY

Excerpted and adapted from "Meeting in the Middle: Moving on Without Leaving Your Family Behind," by Hope Medina, with permission from Hope Medina and the 2011 Northern California Forum for Diversity in Graduate Education ~ University of San Francisco, October 29, 2011

College provides you with a rich learning and social environment where you can thrive with the help of peers, professors, and mentors who have had years of working with intelligent and motivated students like yourself. Pursuing an undergraduate education teaches you a lot about yourself – it gives you the necessary time to really discover what you do and don't like to do, as well as an opportunity to get involved with internships, research, and activities that prove invaluable in discerning career and/or educational goals. Once you find what you love to do you will go out of your way to figure out how to reach the next level. From your perspective, summer research or graduate school may be the most natural and logical next step in your life!

Keep in mind, however, that unless you have been diligent about keeping you *family* up-to-date about your plans, they do not have the same advantages. It might not be as clear to them as it is to you why you would want to do summer research or get a Ph.D. What is undergraduate summer research? What is a Ph.D.? Why would you want to move away, spend many more years in school, or take valuable time away from earning a salary?

"I have been continually amazed at the breadth and quality of research being performed by undergraduate students. The critical thinking skills, the passion, and the confidence they have in their work is impressive. But in students who have no history of higher education in their families, I have seen this confidence slip away only to be replaced by a certain type of anxiety – anxiety that is personal and emerges from the desire to pursue their own dreams while at the same time honoring their families expectations.

If you are a first-generation college student, and especially a student of color, with no higher education in your family, how do you explain why you want to go away for summer research? How do you explain why you want to go to graduate school? It was a question I asked myself when I decided to pursue a graduate degree."

*Hope Medina
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Here is some advice from Hope Medina (Advisor at the Student Academic Success Center, University of California, Davis) and her undergraduate students on how to talk with your family about your academic aspirations. Ms. Medina coordinates MURALS, a sponsored research program that affords highly qualified first-generation or financial aid students the opportunity to be mentored through a research project by a campus faculty member. Formerly, she worked for several years as a pre-graduate school advisor assisting undergraduate students with the graduate application process.

- ❖ *Keep your family up-to-date* about your undergraduate academic life and your academic dreams. If you keep your family current, your future plans will be easier to discuss.
- ❖ *Involve your family* in the process of researching, selecting, and applying to programs. Talk to them about the summer research programs or the schools you're interested in; show them what an application looks like and what kind of information it requires. Share with them the resume, personal statements and essays you are working on. You might be surprised by how interested they are and by the questions they ask you.
- ❖ *Be patient.* You may find yourself having to explain things more than once or in different ways to your family in order for them to understand fully. Don't let this frustration overwhelm you. Explaining your motivations may be second nature to you now, but remember, you were once in their position.
- ❖ *Learn how to talk about summer research and graduate school.* Learn how to describe what these opportunities are and how they can help you achieve your aspirations. How does summer research expand your horizons? What does graduate school mean for your life? What kinds of jobs can you get with a graduate degree like a Masters or a Ph.D.?
- ❖ If your family is concerned about your financial security, explain how a graduate degree will help you become more financially stable.
- ❖ *Don't cave* under family pressure. Students felt strongly that even if their family couldn't understand their reasons now, they would once they saw how much more fulfilled and happier they would be in a profession they loved.

"When my mentor explained the process of becoming a professor, I knew that I had years of additional training ahead of me. There wasn't a way around this fact. More education was an exciting process for me; less so for my family. My father has a high-school diploma, my mother had an eighth-grade education, and no one in my immediate family has a college degree.

Like all parents, mine knew that having a four-year college education would make my life an easier and much different one than they or my extended family had ever known. But graduate school needed some explaining. Why did I need to pursue more schooling that would take valuable time away from working in a career where I would be earning money?"

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