



## Phi Theta Kappa Founder's Medal Winning Submission 2026

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In high school, I focused almost entirely on academics. I took advanced classes, learned how to study efficiently, and became comfortable excelling within structured systems. I didn't feel the need to pursue activities outside of class, and I believed that if I continued performing well academically, my future would eventually come together on its own. Education felt like something I could complete correctly.

When those classes didn't lead to admission to the universities I wanted, I thought I was simply unlucky. Others reinforced that idea, without realizing that I had never translated my academic performance beyond the classroom. Looking back, I see that I was doing only what I was obligated to do as a student. I followed paths that were defined for me, choosing AP classes because I liked their pace and the people in them, not because I had developed a clear sense of direction.

I entered Berkeley City College believing the missing piece was simply being at a university. My goal was clear: structure my courses for a one-year transfer. Because my AP credits made it possible, I spent a month over the summer planning a perfect schedule. I met repeatedly with counselors, refining prerequisites while switching between majors. I didn't need to decide yet, I told myself, as long as my classes kept every option open. Classes were familiar. They felt safe.

After weeks of visiting campus to confirm my plan, I was told my questions would be better answered by the Career and Transfer Center coordinator. When I finally met her, I came prepared with hyper-specific questions and a fully planned pathway. Instead of just answering them, she noted my level of preparation and offered me a job in the Transfer Center. I accepted without hesitation: relieved that I could help my family financially, excited to build professional skills, and confident that the role would give me an edge in accessing transfer resources early. At the time, it fit my plan perfectly.

I started working in August, during the height of UC application season. Students came in daily, anxious about essays, extracurriculars, and how to approach the application as a whole. I understood the process well enough to explain the structure of the application.

As the semester progressed, I began tabling regularly in the college atrium, speaking with students at every stage of their community college journey. I took down names, contact information, and notes on what kind of support they needed, then relayed that information to the Transfer Center coordinator so they could be guided appropriately. Through this role, I began to see how much growth happens outside the classroom and how necessary that growth would be for my future.

The moment that shifted my understanding of community college came during the final week of November, when UC applications were due. Because it was Thanksgiving week, students only had two days to receive last-minute help. The Transfer Center quickly filled up, and I realized many students would be left without support. I had recently started a Transfer Club on campus, and I decided to extend my work beyond my paid hours. I reserved an extra room so students could work when the Transfer Center overflowed, coordinated with other clubs to distribute information, used club funds to provide food so students could focus, and contacted alumni attending UC Berkeley nearby to help review essays.

Even then, there were more students than we anticipated. I found myself reading essays and helping students directly, despite feeling unprepared for that level of responsibility, especially since I had shifted away from my one-year transfer plan and committed to staying two years. It was then that I began to understand the value of my community college education. I initially wanted to leave quickly because others' viewpoints made community college seem inferior, and I feared being looked down upon for being here. Instead, community college placed me in environments where initiative mattered immediately, where responsibility came early, and where my actions had direct impact on others. I stopped seeing it as a place to pass through and began seeing it as a place to grow deliberately.

Once I stopped rushing to leave community college, I began using it as a place to experiment intentionally. Instead of asking which commitments would help me transfer fastest, I started asking where I could test what kind of contributor I was becoming. Community college gave me the freedom to explore without being anonymous and the proximity to see the consequences of my choices.

In the MESA Center, I moved from being a participant in learning spaces to designing them. Only a semester earlier, I had been intimidated by CIS 27 Data Structures & Algorithms myself. Through conversations with peers, I realized that the fear surrounding the course didn't come from the code, but from a lack of intuition for what was happening behind the scenes. I built a workshop to introduce these concepts early, allowing students to encounter them in a way they could remember. When students entered and exited at different points, I noticed my design assumed shared context that didn't exist. I rebuilt the workshop so students could join at any moment without losing

understanding and later expanded it into a series that brought in graduate students and professionals across disciplines.

These experiences taught me to think systemically about learning spaces: who is entering, what context they may be missing, and how to design environments that remain accessible without assuming a common starting point.

As a low-income student, the accessibility of these opportunities mattered. Community college lowered barriers that would have made early research and national STEM programs feel unreachable elsewhere. Within this ecosystem, I was able to engage in STEM experiences at organizations like NASA and conduct research with UC Berkeley, not because I had prior status or resources, but because initiative was met with trust and access. These opportunities were visible and attainable if I was willing to step forward and take responsibility. That structure allowed me to explore STEM deeply while still supporting my family.

As my involvement grew, so did the scale of my responsibility. Serving as Student Trustee pushed me beyond personal growth and into district-wide leadership across four colleges. When proposing a districtwide club ecosystem, I learned that effective leadership meant reshaping ideas through others' perspectives. After hearing concerns from a student president whose campus served a different student population, I visited their college and realized that student connections there centered around academic spaces rather than clubs. I revised the proposal to emphasize collaboration and communication across campuses, not just visibility. In doing so, I learned that leadership is about adapting it to serve the people it affects.

Community college allowed me to take on these responsibilities early, before I felt fully ready, and in environments where initiative mattered more than polish. Instead of optimizing speed, I learned to prioritize depth. By the time I transfer, I will not be leaving because I rushed to escape, but because I have built the confidence, skills, and sense of responsibility needed to contribute at a larger scale. The value of my community college education lies in how it demanded that growth from me sooner than anywhere else could.