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Kika Friend engages with a student from C.A.M.P. who is attending a physics seminar. Michelle S. Kim/University Communications

CAMP counselor

Kika Friend helps prepare students in UCI's California Alliance Minority Participation program for careers in math and science.

ON AUGUST 5, 2010

Even after three decades, Kika Friend still remembers the words of her high school guidance counselor when she asked what classes she needed to get into college. The response: "You should just take a lot of typing classes, because you're going to get married."

Fortunately, Friend ignored that advice. Born in Mexico, she'd moved to California at age 12 and spent two years traveling around the state as her mother – a migrant farm worker and a widow with six children – followed the crops. Going to college was a dream, and she was the first in her family to achieve it.

"I've always had a way of looking at the world as a place where anything is possible," Friend says. "It's because of my mother's ability to turn a negative into a positive."

Today, with two master's degrees, she helps other underrepresented minority students earn degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics – or STEM – as program director at UC Irvine's [California Alliance for Minority Participation](#).

UCI launched CAMP in 1991 as part of the National Science Foundation's [Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation Program](#) and now serves as lead campus of UC's statewide CAMP initiative; seven other UC campuses offer the program.

"We nurture these students so that all of the STEM marginalized groups – including African Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos and Latinos, and Pacific Islanders – can come into the fold and be part of the emerging scientific global workforce and professoriate," Friend says.

"This is the kind of program that helps define UC Irvine," adds Chancellor Michael Drake, systemwide principal

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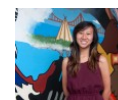
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investigator on CAMP. “We put a high priority on ensuring that talented students get every opportunity to succeed at the highest level.”

In July, about 40 incoming freshmen participated in CAMP’s Summer Science Academy, living on campus and taking a university-level science, math or writing class for credit. The “mental boot camp” has been offered for 19 years, but budget cutbacks shortened this year’s academy from six to three weeks. (Instead of a four-unit chemistry course, they took a one-unit class called “Critical Thinking for STEM Majors.”)

With each new cohort, Friend acts like a protective den mother. She stays in a dorm with the students several nights a week, and she often invites them to hang out in her room and chat. She shares meals with them in the commons, attends faculty talks and parent barbecues, and helps freshmen find their way around campus.

“They’re a little bit lost. Many have left tight-knit families behind for the first time. Some have never slept away from home. Most are the first generation to go to college, so it’s all new,” Friend says. “By the end of the academy, they’ve bonded with each other. They don’t want to go home.”

CAMP monitors students’ academic progress throughout college, matches them with mentors, and prepares them for graduate school and careers. Every summer, about 25 CAMP undergraduates attend a 10-week science research program, working in labs with UCI faculty. Each student presents a research poster at several national and state symposia during the following academic year.

Past projects have included a satellite signaling device that allows military aircraft to identify their own convoys on the ground in Iraq and a microchip to be worn in shoes that alerts the elderly when they’re starting to lose their balance and in danger of falling.

“CAMP taught me how to be a researcher,” says Dr. Judith Garcia ’95, a physician at the Salud Para La Gente clinic in Watsonville, Calif. “It opened doors and introduced me to the science community. And Kika always looked out for us. She made sure we had the right tools to succeed.”

For her work with CAMP, which she has directed since 1993, Friend received the 2005 Distinguished Professional Mentor Award from [SACNAS](#), a society that supports minorities in science. She earned an Outstanding Supporter of Prevention Award from Irvine Community Drug Prevention in 2006 for her psychotherapy work with a local domestic violence shelter and most recently was named one of the 2009 [Latino OC 100](#) by Stay Connected OC for her role in education.

Friend credits her mother – one of Cesar Chavez’s first labor organizers in Oxnard – with inspiring her to become a Latina leader. (She’s chronicling her mother’s experiences in an upcoming book, *Snapshots of My Soul*.)

“Kika is a personal hero of mine. I consider her my second mother,” says Daniel Vera ’02, a senior analyst with a Newport Beach investment management firm who earned a bachelor’s from UCI and a doctorate in math from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when he was just 21. “In addition to the incredible support she and the CAMP program provided me during my undergraduate career at UCI, Kika was a guardian angel who kept a lookout for me when I went on to MIT at the tender age of 17. I’m so thankful for all she’s done.”

CAMP graduates have gone on to become doctors, like Garcia, as well as engineers, scientists, university professors and researchers. They often stay in touch with Friend and share job leads with fellow CAMP alumni and students.

“The program gives people opportunities they wouldn’t have otherwise,” Garcia says. “Many of us who come from very low-income backgrounds are grateful to Kika and everyone at CAMP. If not for them, we wouldn’t be in the positions we are today.”

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