In the following pages, we talk to students and alumni who share their Pacific Experience and the profound impact made on them by professors who know their name.

Who is University of Pacific?
It’s a vibrant community with a supportive and engaging culture. It’s faculty who are dedicated to teaching and mentoring. It’s students who are prepared not only for successful careers but for meaningful lives.

In the ivy-framed brick buildings on the Stockton campus, at Pacific’s high-tech spaces in San Francisco, and on its Sacramento campus in the influential state capital, you’ll see all of this happening.

What’s the Pacific Experience?
So many factors go into the student experience—classes and professors, internships and studying abroad, athletics and community service, helping clients and patients.

But there’s one thing that continues to surface when you talk with Pacific students and alumni—one thing that connects them. On all three of Pacific’s campuses, from every generation of graduates, you’ll hear this: professors know your name.

It’s more than just knowing your name, of course. The professors know who you are and know your story. They help you find your passion and reach your potential. And they continue to follow your career and cheer you on long after you’ve graduated.

By Katie E. Ismael
Matt de la Peña ’96

“I entered Pacific as a basketball player, but I left as a scholar and a writer. And this transformation was the direct result of the professors I worked with.”
Matt de la Peña, the author of critically acclaimed young adult novels and picture books, didn't grow up liking to read. In fact—and he's not proud of this—he didn't read a novel all the way through until after high school.

Yet it would be a book—one given to him by a Pacific professor—that would change his life.

In an essay for National Public Radio's Code Switch, de la Peña talked about the day when former Pacific English professor Heather Mayne stopped him near the old bookstore his sophomore year—him, a basketball player who had been more interested in playing ball and hanging out than having anything to do with books and words.

Excerpts from the essay “Sometimes the 'Tough Teen' Is Quietly Writing Stories”:

“I was rereading this last night,” she said, holding out a book for me, “and I thought of you.”

“Me?” I took the book and studied the cover.

“You.” She made me promise to read it before I graduated. “And when you finish,” she said, “come talk to me. That's all I ask. Deal?”

That gave me 2 1/2 years. “Deal,” I told her.

I took the book with me on our next basketball road trip, to New Mexico State. The night before the game I cracked it open and read the first 10 or 15 pages. Why'd she give me this book? I wondered. It wasn't any good… This was usually when I'd toss a book aside, telling myself it just wasn't my thing. But that wasn't an option in this case. I needed to find out why my professor had connected me to this one specific book.

By Page 50 or so, I started caring about the character. She had a really tough life, far tougher than anything I'd experienced, and I tried to put myself in her shoes. The broken English which seemed awkward at first, became poetic. I read a third of the novel that night and went to sleep.

After our game the next day, which we won on a buzzer-beater, I hustled back to my hotel room to continue reading my book. I finished at four in the morning.

The book I read that night was Alice Walker's The Color Purple.

My professor said something I will never forget when I went and talked to her the following week. Even in the harshest and ugliest of circumstances, she explained, there's still hope. That's what she loved most about The Color Purple.

It's what I loved most, too, I decided.

That hope.

De la Peña, who was born in National City in a rough Mexican neighborhood near San Diego, never thought he could be an actual writer. Though he had notebooks full of spoken-word-style poetry, he never showed anyone.

But once he got to Pacific, he said he started to believe.

There was Religious Studies Professor Larry Meredith, whose class amazed him. He hung on the now-retired professor's every word. Poetry professor Gil Schedler, also now retired, was the first person who ever said his poetry was good. Because of the professor's reinforcement, de la Peña submitted his work in his junior year for the Hansen Award, Pacific's creative writing award.

"And I won. [English professor] Camille Norton introduced me at the banquet, and she said such incredibly nice things about my work that I was speechless," he remembers now.

English professor Heather Mayne's takeaway from The Color Purple also remains with him today.

“I always go back to my professor's line about The Color Purple. Even in the harshest and ugliest of circumstances, there's still hope," he said in his NPR essay.

De la Peña is the author of six young adult novels, including Mexican White Boy, The Living and The Hunted, and the award-winning picture books A Nations Hope and Last Stop on Market Street. Last Stop on Market Street was recently featured on NPR's Morning Edition and was ranked No. 7 on The New York Times Best Sellers —Children's Picture Books list for the week of March 1.
Seung “Fred” Ra ’15
with mentors Nina Flyer (left), cello professor, and Feilin Hsiao (right), professor of music therapy, who shaped him into the music therapist he is today

As he was preparing to enter Pacific’s Conservatory of Music four years ago, Fred Ra had a million questions. The Southern California native had no friends or connections in Northern California. He was worried about his parents and what this new world away from home would bring.

During the interview process required for acceptance into the Conservatory as a music therapy and cello major, Ra connected with music therapy professor Feilin Hsiao. Like Ra, Hsiao was also from Southern California. She introduced him to upper-class music therapy students and became his advisor, helping him find his comfort zone and academic path at Pacific.

And for his 19th birthday—his first away from home—she even brought him a cake. She knew that particular birthday, without his family around, was a big deal for Ra.

“It was the best thing ever,” he recalls with a grin.

Throughout Ra’s college experience, Hsiao has supported him not just in academics but also in his personal growth. They would spend hours talking about his classes, his future studies and music therapy career path—and his overall well-being.

One time the two were debriefing following a therapy session Ra gave at a nursing home for patients with early onset dementia and Alzheimer’s. It was just before Valentine’s Day, and during the session Ra and the patients sang the Elvis Presley song “Can’t Help Falling in Love” to promote discussion and remembrance. One of the patients had recently lost his wife and began crying. As Ra was reflecting with Hsiao afterward, he couldn’t help but think about his own parents. He, too, broke down and cried.

Hsiao reassured him, telling him it’s OK to have emotions about his patients.

Ra has a dual-support system with Hsiao and his cello professor, Nina Flyer, who will check on him and reach out if they hear he’s stressed. That level of concern and mentorship is typical of the close-knit and supportive community in the Conservatory.

A recent visit to Southern California gave Hsiao the opportunity to visit Ra’s hometown in Northridge and meet his father. She wanted to meet him, as she likes to do with the parents of all her student musicians, and Ra’s parents hadn’t been able to visit campus very often due to their work schedules. So she came to him.

That personal attention from his professors has paid off. This spring Ra will decide among several internship opportunities to fulfill the clinical portion of his degree. He will also assume a leadership role with the student board of the Western Region of the American Music Therapy Association when he becomes its president in March.

He then intends to go straight to graduate school, with a solid career direction and with the background and experience he’s sure will get him there. Ultimately he wants to work with children in a hospital or school setting, a goal Hsiao has helped him to identify and sharpen.

“The whole interaction and relationship with Dr. Hsiao led me to be the therapist I’m turning out to be,” he said.

“Pacific professors,” Ra said, “know you by more than your name—they know you by your life story.”

“Pacific professors know you by more than your name— they know you by your life story.”
Mark Booth ’01
Group Practice Leader at the Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry

with Dr. Russ Woodson (right), a former professor and current colleague who is credited with playing a crucial role in Booth’s success

Mark Booth knows the Pacific Experience from both sides—as a Dugoni student and now as a teacher.

From his student days, his best memories are the relationships he formed with both his classmates and the faculty—some of whom are his colleagues today. One in particular, his group practice administrator, Dr. Russ Woodson, he credits with having played a crucial role in his success as a dental student.

“During the trials and tribulations of my third year of dental school, Dr. Woodson did an amazing job of keeping me grounded and focused. There were many times that I would become frustrated and struggle. Dr. Woodson was able to help me see the best in any situation, which allowed me to regain my focus.”

During school he said he caught the teaching bug when he oversaw the student dentists at the school’s Advanced Education in General Dentistry program in Union City. After graduating, he went into private practice in Concord—but he felt isolated and had no one to talk to about his cases. Three years later he rejoined Dugoni, eager to return to a family atmosphere.

“I was a little hesitant because most people don’t go into dental school to be educators, but the moment I got in the building I realized quickly that I was meant to do this.”

Woodson would again play a significant role for Booth.

“When I returned to teach, I was lucky enough to have Dr. Woodson as a mentor and colleague. Later, when I became a group practice leader, Dr. Woodson was always very generous with his time as he mentored me. To this day, I pass on many of the valuable lessons that I learned from Dr. Woodson.”

Now in his fifth year of teaching, Booth says he loves the diversity of his position as group practice leader. In addition to being a teacher, he’s also a counselor and parent to his students and helps them with the inevitable growing pains that occur with life.

“It’s the relationships that I enjoy, and I think that’s the special part of dentistry,” he said. “It’s also the special part of what we have here at Pacific Dugoni—the family.”

Last year, for example, one of the students in his group lost her father. His death was unexpected, and it was a very challenging time for her and her family, Booth recalled. He did his best to support and encourage her, he said, and he was inspired by how much courage and character she displayed throughout the year.

“Though I know that her heart was burdened with grief and sadness, she never lost her professional demeanor and strong work ethic,” he said. “It was truly rewarding and inspiring to watch her cross the stage at graduation. Witnessing the growth and development of all my students is a gift that I truly treasure.”

“Witnessing the growth and development of all of my students is a gift that I truly treasure.”
Professors who know your name:

It’s a simple phrase that sums up what we hear time and time again from students and alumni about their Pacific experience. You’ll see it expressed in University brochures, in our stories and on the web.

A catalog of videos and stories, which keeps on growing, tells the shared experience of our Pacific community.

Find them at: go.Pacific.edu/ProfessorsWhoKnowYourName

Kristian Corby ’13
who credits McGeorge Professor Stephen C. McCaffrey with helping him get his “dream job” in environmental law
When then-prospective law student Kristian Corby was researching schools to match his interest in water law, he noticed that one name—Stephen C. McCaffrey—kept cropping up.

McCaffrey, a Distinguished Professor at McGeorge School of Law, is a titan of international water law. He has drafted conventions on the use of international waterways for the United Nations; he regularly represents countries in water disputes before the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands; he has served as a former counselor on international law for the U.S. State Department; and he also advises Palestine on the permanent status talks with Israel.

What Corby didn’t know was how McCaffrey would become so much more than just a celebrity professor—that he would serve as his trusted advisor, mentor and, eventually, colleague—and that he represented the kind of personalized education McGeorge offers.

“It was unreal that I was going to be able to study with him. He was like a rock star. When I first met him I was intimidated, but then as I took his classes and met with him in his office hours, I got to know this humble, down-to-earth, easygoing guy,” says Corby. “And he is absolutely the sharp point of the spear when it comes to international water law.”

Corby wanted to go to law school on the West Coast, and he came to realize that Sacramento’s first-tier position in Western water law issues, coupled with the access to McCaffrey, made McGeorge a natural choice.

It was a choice that’s proved to be a good one for Corby. He co-founded McGeorge’s Water Law Society, which taps the region’s expertise to deliver important educational opportunities for students. He also pitched McCaffrey on a possible water law fellowship, for which he provided enthusiastic support.

“We were sitting in class and he said that when he goes to The Hague, he’s the only one who doesn’t have any assistants. Well, my ears perked up. After class, I said I’d be interested in doing that and that I’d be glad to look at grant programs to fund it. He was absolutely, ‘Yeah, do that. That’d be great.’ That spawned the water law fellowship.”

Corby would become the first-ever McGeorge Water Fellow, where he assisted McCaffrey in case preparations for disputes before the International Court of Justice and authored articles in prominent law publications.

Not that McCaffrey would ever take any of the credit.

“Every time the fellowship idea comes up, he says the same thing: ‘You know, Kristian, that was your idea. You’re the one who got that off the ground.’"

Corby says that McCaffrey provided him with the foundation for his success both at McGeorge and in the workplace. He is now an associate attorney at King Williams & Gleason LLP, a Sacramento-based environmental law firm, where he specializes in hazardous waste remediation.

“Part of the reason I’ve been able to be successful is because McGeorge is so willing to entertain student ideas,” he said.

“This is a dream job. I never would have expected that as a first-year attorney I would be gaining experience in the highly competitive field of environmental law,” he said. “I’m working directly with partners, writing motions, helping determine strategy. I’m not just looking under the hood—I’m helping build the engine. It’s fantastic.”

—Stephen Robitaille

Examples of stories and content found on the web