How Science Olympiad Shaped One Student's Path to UC Irvine

An interview with UC Irvine Science Olympian Antonio Velasco.
Tuesday, April 01, 2025
Lucas Van Wyk Joel
UC Irvine Physical Sciences Communications



“My most memorable moments come from all the time at tournaments, in between the non-stop action of the events," said Velasco. "It's always nice to see everybody, and every tournament is different.”

Picture Credit:
UC Irvine

In February, over 1,000 Orange County middle and high school students came to UC Irvine to compete in a range of science-themed competitions as part of the OC Regional Science Olympiad. The founder and president of the Science Olympiad student organization at UCI, undergraduate engineering student Antonio Velasco, started competing in Science Olympiad as a middle schooler in his home state of Hawaii, and now helps organize the UCI event. The UCI School of Physical Sciences caught up with Velasco to hear how competing in Science Olympiad as a K-12 student helped him find his way into science and, eventually, to UCI.

The UC Irvine schools of Physical Sciences, Information and Computer Sciences, Engineering, Biological Sciences and Public Health sponsored the Olympiad, which saw over 100 UCI students volunteer on the day of the competition, as well as help create test materials and supervise competitions.

SoPS: So, you started competing in Science Olympiad early on, right?

AV: Yep! I competed in middle school and high school for six years. I primarily did the chemistry events – Potions & Poisons, Crime Busters, Forensics – and some others that I fell in love with, like Meteorology, Herpetology and more. I competed in Hawai'i while attending Highlands Intermediate and Pearl City High School – but my most memorable Olympiad moments were on the trips we took to California. On one of those trips, I actually visited UCI and discovered the programs here, which lead me to apply!

SoPS: Sounds like your Olympiad involvement really helped define your professional path.

AV: Being exposed to various STEM fields at an earlier age, I was able to explore more careers and figure out exactly what I wanted to do. Initially, I thought it would be something related to chemistry, but as time went on and I tried more events, I discovered engineering was my calling. Most importantly, though, is how Science Olympiad helped me become a part of an amazing community that I've created a ton of priceless memories with.

SoPS: In what ways do you help run the Olympiad?

AV: I'm currently the Hawai'i State Director, running the program in Hawai'i, and the SoCal Volunteer Coordinator, managing the staffing for tournaments throughout

SoCal. Previously, I founded the UC Irvine Alumni Chapter with some fellow former Science Olympiad competitors, and have since passed on the torch to the new amazing leads, Simon Li and Kelly Tada.

SoPS: What’s it like being a part of running Science Olympiad instead of competing in it?

AV: It's been very interesting to see the other side and super fun to put on tournaments. I'm very passionate about it because I feel I'm giving back to the program that kick started my career. I think I’m very fortunate to be an engineer today, and I can wholeheartedly say that it was Science Olympiad that sparked my interest in STEM. It means a lot to me to not only put on the competition, but to provide that opportunity for students to get excited about STEM.

Feature Stories
Instruction
Physics & Astronomy
Earth System Science
Math
Chemistry
View PDF