

Vanessa Kauffman '99

Doctoral Student in Sociology

Since 2014, Vanessa Kauffman '99 has been a part of the sociology doctoral program at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), where a typical day involves attending graduate seminars, teaching undergrads, and doing her own research. She is truly in her element, but it's something she never could have imagined when she was that young child who first attended Benchmark. "There are facets within graduate education that make it difficult for people who learn differently," she said. "Certain aspects [of academia] have been really challenging, so I'm really proud to have gotten into an excellent doctoral program and to be fully funded for six years."

She entered Benchmark as a seven year old who was struggling with learning to read. She soon found Benchmark to be a good fit for the academic support that she needed. Hard work and a different approach to learning have changed her path. "At Benchmark, I not only learned how to read based on how I was processing material, but I was given the support and opportunities to succeed," Vanessa said. Additionally, Benchmark helped her develop self-confidence. "After not feeling good about myself, it was such a wonderful feeling to be with supportive teachers and other kids who were like me."

Vanessa looks back fondly at her Benchmark days and said that one of her greatest accomplishments has

been the journey of getting to where she is today. "Benchmark changed my life 100% and I know for a fact that without Benchmark I wouldn't be doing what I am today," she said. "The teachers at Benchmark really changed my life and instilled in me a strong love of learning."

Following her time at Benchmark, Vanessa went on to Radnor High School and then Temple University, where she earned a B.A. in political science. While she knew at that point that she eventually wanted to go on to get her doctorate, she took a few years off to work and had several life experiences that changed her focus of study from political science to sociology. She notes that her experiences teaching environmental education to at-risk youth, founding and directing the environmental social service non-profit Big Blue Marble Inc., and backpacking through the Canadian Arctic where she interacted with people who were native to that area, helped her realize that her interests were actually in the field of sociology. She followed her new-found passion to the University of Chicago. There, she completed a one-year M.A. program in the social sciences with a concentration in sociology, followed by her current studies at UCI.

Using her current locale of California beaches to the fullest advantage, Vanessa's most recent research is focused on studying how women succeed in spaces that are



typically male-dominated—specifically female surfers. But her time at UCI has also helped her develop a love for teaching. "I really value the Benchmark teachers who instilled that strong love of learning in me, and it's been great to help other students in the same way," she said. "It's fun introducing young people to a different way of thinking about society. Plus, being around people who are excited to learn re-invigorates you, and I have learned so much in the process."

In addition to continuing to enjoy the sunshine and outdoor activities that California offers, Vanessa looks forward to completing her doctorate and then hopes to work for a university and teach and do research—perhaps on the East Coast closer to family. Regardless of where she ends up, she knows that the skills Benchmark taught her will help her to continue being successful. "I don't take the literacy or reading skills I learned at Benchmark for granted, as I read quite a bit in my profession," she said. "I also still use the organizational tools, make mind maps to diagram papers, and use the confidence Benchmark fostered to be a strong self-advocate."

Her advice to current Benchmark students is to "trust and feel good about yourself. What you are learning at Benchmark will help you through your whole life, and the tools you are learning will set you up for success." 

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