The journey to teaching is often very personal and can be especially challenging for students from low-income backgrounds. In California, becoming a teacher can require nearly $1000 in testing and certification fees, and over 500 hours of student-teaching in K-12 in schools without pay. Support from Hispanic-Serving Institution grants can make a difference in becoming a teacher. Valeria Ordoñez Zavala is one student for whom support from an HSI grant had a significant impact.

Zavala immigrated to the United States while in middle school and worked tirelessly to realize her college dream, becoming the first in her family to attend college. She enrolled at the University of California, Irvine because she, “knew that [she] wanted to be a teacher from the beginning, but also wanted a science degree.” Supported by the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions grant, the UCI CalTeach program allows students to complete both their STEM degrees and preliminary teaching credential in four years. CalTeach at UCI was designed to prepare diverse STEM teachers to serve marginalized communities. The program is rigorous, with students starting preliminary teaching in classrooms in their first year, and then spending over 700 hours in K-12 classrooms teaching during their senior year.

Participants are required to engage in field-based classroom observations and instruction each year of the program, meaning they need to either drive or find transportation to classrooms in the field, creating financial burdens for many students. Challenges arose for Zavala early in the program. During those early classes, she had to ride her bike for an hour and a half each way to get to the elementary school she was observing twice a week, while working nearly 20 hours a week to help her parents and support herself.

Once Zavala began student teaching, she realized that her work schedule would be detrimental to her academics. She was able to cut back on her work hours to concentrate on completing her certification through funding she received from the HSI grant. This included retaking one of her CSET exams, a requirement for student teaching. Zavala considered giving up on her teaching dream when she initially failed the CSET exam, but persisted in large part because she would not have to incur the additional cost of retaking the test.

The grant also helped defray transportation costs during student teaching so that she would not have to wake up at 4 a.m. to take a bus to her school site five days a week. Through perseverance and with Title V support, Zavala graduated with her bachelor of science in biology and preliminary teaching credential in 2019 and now teaches science to middle school students in south Los Angeles County.