After graduating from the Monterey Institute of International Studies, when my classmates went off to the four corners of the world, I didn’t go far at all. In fact, I went only seven miles, to California State University Monterey Bay. Many of my classmates have been surprised that I chose to stay local, but if MIIS tells us that we can be the solution, the truth is we don’t have to go far to find the problem.

According to census data from 2013, only 23% of adults in Monterey County age 25 or over have achieved a Bachelor’s degree or higher (compared to a statewide statistic of 30.7%). Unfortunately, despite education being an issue that everyone can get behind, it never receives the funding or attention it deserves. Education is the ultimate form of empowerment and yet here in this county, less than a quarter of the population has completed college. I have been lucky to study at two amazing schools for my degrees, so working in a program that aims to close this gap in educational attainment and help others achieve the opportunities that I have been given seemed like a great place to start.

TRiO Student Support Services is a national, federally funded program to support first-generation, low-income students and students with disabilities through their college careers. At CSUMB, TRiO SSS not only aims to improve these populations’ graduation rates and academic standing, but to empower students in their personal, professional, and academic growth. In Fall 2013, CSUMB accepted 5,303 first-time freshmen. 57% of these students (over 3000) are first-generation – meaning they are the first in their family to receive a college education – and 35% are low-income (CSUMB Institutional Assessment and Research, 2014). As enrollment has grown, these numbers have only increased. Fortunately, CSUMB is intentional about serving these populations: the university’s vision statement underlines that CSUMB aims to “be distinctive in serving the diverse people of California, especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations.” These students face a host of academic challenges as they transition to college: compared to the general student body, they often have lower ACT/SAT scores and are more likely to be enrolled in remedial courses, meaning they earn less
credits after their first year. They are more likely to have a lower cumulative GPA and to be on academic probation, and less likely to graduate within six years.

The numbers are powerful, but the obstacles these students face are impossible to express in quantitative terms and the ways in which they are not prepared for college go far beyond academics. If no one in your family has been to college, if no one you know has had the resources to get themselves the education they deserve, if you did not grow up hearing stories from your parents’ college days, when you make it to college there is a lot you simply do not know. “You don’t even know what you don’t know,” one of my co-workers says, and it is true: both for our students and for the institutions where they are enrolled. Students from these populations are ignorant of some of the basics of college life, and the institutions serving them, even with the best intentions, often do not understand that. As a result, our students express an overwhelming sense of feeling lost, disconnected, like they do not belong. When they do not hear anyone else asking the questions they have, they think they are the only ones who do not know and become even more reluctant to seek assistance.

As such, the most important and powerful thing we do in SSS and similar programs is create a safe space where these students feel they can come for anything: to vent, to ask for advice (”My parents want me to come home every weekend to work and take care of my siblings — how can I make them understand how hard I work here?”), to ask their “stupid” questions (“What’s FAFSA? “Don’t I have to take the same classes next semester, like in high school?” “How do I get my college email?”), to cry, to learn what classes to take, how to talk to professors, how to manage their time, how to write a college-level paper, how to deal with roommates. This space is essential because, no matter what: background we as staff come from, we cannot anticipate the students’ every question or need. We offer a host of services that will benefit them, and we have experienced, caring staff implementing these programs. But at the end of the day, it is not about us telling the students what to do or what they need: they know better than anyone. We need to give them the space to develop their own voice and grow comfortable using it, so they will be able to advocate for themselves and their communities long after they have left our institution.

What is most striking, and even harder to capture in numbers, is the dexterity and determination with which these students deal with overwhelming challenges. They may doubt themselves sometimes, but by the time we meet them they have already overcome so much. We have students who are parents, who work full-time, who commute hours to school everyday, who have spent their summers working in the fields, who have lived on the streets. Who refuse to take a cent from their parents, not because their parents aren’t willing but because it hurts them to put extra pressure on them; who write in scholarship applications that their biggest dream is to be able to support their parents. Students who have never been on a plane, never been out of the state, but are heading to D.C. to advocate for young people like themselves. Not content with being the first in their family to go to college, they seek to be the first to study abroad, to own a home, to get a Ph.D. Best of all, we see students blossom into incredible role models who spend more time and effort than they should realistically have in serving as mentors for new students who are just beginning this journey.

As the SSS Administrative Assistant and Tutor, I make sure the program is running smoothly everyday — from managing the budget to event planning to supervising student staff — so that the students receive services and support without interruption. But I also get to meet with the students — at events and workshops, in tutoring and advising appointments — and it is impossible not to make many close connections. I use the skills I learned as a conflict resolution student everyday, from managing conflicts and fighting for our students to get the opportunities they deserve, to introducing them to skills they can gain from this field: understanding a system that exercises a significant amount of structural violence against them, managing their shifting
identities, and more. When advising students, I have found that my knowledge in this field gives me a variety of lenses to understand their choices and needs, and more importantly, the tools to push them to begin these reflections on their own. They are in a position to give so much back to some of the communities who need it the most, and these are crucial skills for them to develop.

My classmates usually express some surprise that I have chosen to stay in Monterey. As a continuing student of conflict resolution and someone who has been a part of CCS since its beginning, it is crucial to me that my job allows me to work for change. If knowledge leads to action and action leads to change, it only makes sense to work to provide more knowledge for populations that historically have had less access to it. The actions of my students will spread far beyond the actions I could undertake by myself, and I have faith in them to take positive action. As it turns out, I didn’t have to go far at all to work for change.

Journey After MIIS

by Omar Salem

I received an M.A. in International Policy Studies with a focus in Conflict Resolution. During my time at MIIS I was fortunate to work for the Center for Conflict studies. I had a wonderful learning experience designing and conducting a conflict resolution course for students at the North Monterey County Middle School. I traveled to Gujarat, India where I conducted field research on the Hindu-Muslim conflict there. I also lent analytic support to a CCS research project on the use of social media by political leaders. In all, my time as a Conflict Resolution student and working for CCS gave me skills and experience which have greatly contributed to my post-graduation success.

Since I graduated from MIIS in 2013, I had the opportunity to work as a research fellow at the Mixed-Methods Evaluation, Training & Analysis (META) Lab, a research initiative at MIIS, founded around the same time. As a research fellow, my work focused on cultivating relationships with government agencies and non-profit organizations throughout Monterey County which share an interest in youth violence-reduction in Salinas. Through these relationships, I have designed and implemented projects which employ innovative, mixed-methods approaches to support and evaluate youth and gang violence prevention efforts while contributing to the larger policy conversation on the subject.