When the tyrannosaurus rex smashed through the Porta-Potty and inhaled the lawyer, everyone else was screaming. But, as it turned out, when it comes to dinosaurs, Isaac Magallanes is not like everyone else. “I’m going to study these creatures,” the then-6-year-old thought, munching popcorn in unison with the T.rex’s powerful jaws, “just as soon as this movie’s over.”

And he did. Isaac’s parents, who immigrated to Orange County from Mexico before he was born, supported their son’s newfound interest in paleontology, even if it did stem from “Jurassic Park.” Thus, the first summer Isaac was old enough, his dad, who worked as a handyman, or his mom, who worked as a caretaker, would wake up extra early to take him to the library, where he would spend the day studying paleontology books.

But like many children from low-income communities, Isaac’s responsibilities quickly escalated. When his father lost his income, Isaac struggled to help support the family, and his interest in dinosaurs was forced into a distant memory. He did, however, keep his grades up, and just 24 months after his family lost their home, he gained admission to Cal State Fullerton.

As a first-generation college student and Latino male, Isaac still faced numerous obstacles to graduation, particularly in comparison with his peers. Many of the reasons for this achievement gap are underscored by Isaac’s story. First, he lives with his family in Anaheim and is counted on to contribute financially. A solution to this obstacle – a job serving smoothies in Westminster – presented other challenges: a third leg to his already long commute, the alluring path of a greater immediate return (a paycheck) and, perhaps most significantly, more time away from campus. Isaac soon found himself disengaging from the university and at risk of falling into the above-mentioned achievement gap.

But then something extraordinary happened: Isaac enrolled in a general education class in geology taught by Assistant Professor of Geological Sciences James Parham. Suddenly, a passion for paleontology that had been dormant since childhood sparked to life, and the wide-eyed dinosaur-loving kid was back. Soon thereafter, a second and arguably more significant life-changing moment occurred, and I present it here through the context of a recent Gallup-Purdue study of more than 30,000 college graduates. It found that “if graduates had a professor who cared about
them as a person and encouraged them to pursue their dreams,” the impact on the graduate transcended academic success, and tapped into their lifelong well-being and career satisfaction.

With this in mind, the importance of Parham noticing and acting upon Isaac’s re-emerging passion for paleontology cannot be understated. When Parham selected Isaac to study fossils from the John D. Cooper Archaeology and Paleontology Center, which is run jointly by CSUF and Orange County, he excelled, changed his major to geological sciences and thenceforth spent every moment he could in the paleontology lab.

Still, however, Isaac’s job was pulling him from campus and threatening to derail his momentum. Again, Parham noticed, and with the professor’s mentorship and support, Isaac was accepted into the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation, a program that aims to increase the number of underrepresented students achieving degrees in the STEM fields. LSAMP enabled Isaac to quit his job serving smoothies and not only spend every spare hour in the lab but also get paid for it. His success led to a second on-campus job in the STEM2 program in which he serves as a peer mentor to underrepresented community college students hoping to transfer to CSUF in the STEM fields.

Today, instead of asking customers if they want whipped cream, or sitting in traffic, or worrying about his family’s finances, Isaac is on campus, bettering himself academically, contributing to his professors’ research and paying it forward as a mentor. He’s presented his research at national conferences, and this summer, he’ll be going to Panama for an internship in his field. But most importantly, a year from now, he will become the first person in his family to graduate from college, after which he will pursue his Ph.D. in paleontology so that he can study fossils in an academic setting and mentor those aspiring to follow in his footsteps.

A worthy goal, and with a new “Jurassic Park” movie coming out this summer, the next generation of Orange County paleontologists soon will likely be seeking him out.