

**Jennifer Chavez-Lanza**  
**Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholar Class of 2010**  
**Studied at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, CA**  
**Project Coordinator, CBOL Corporation**

Jenny moved to Los Angeles from Honduras with her family when she was seven years old. Walking into her elementary school classroom, Jenny didn't know any English, not even "hi." She remembers, "everyone was talking and having fun and there I was just like 'Okay, what do I do.'"

It was Jenny's love of math that helped her to fit in. "I wouldn't understand the language, but in math I was always advanced. I could help my classmates, and that's how I started making friends," she said.

Jenny started tutoring kids in math in middle school and continued through high school. She wanted to go to college, but her family couldn't afford it. As an undocumented student, she was ineligible for most scholarships. Then her school counselor told Jenny about the Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholars program. She applied.

After being awarded the *Ciencia* scholarship, Jenny attended California Lutheran University and majored in mathematics. She continued to tutor students in mathematics and ESL and started teaching small classes.

While she was happy at school, her status as an AB-540 student always weighed on her. "I felt like there were always eyes looking at me saying 'What are you doing? This is not your place.'"

Jenny confronted these voices. When other AB- 540 students abandoned their college hopes, Jenny stayed positive. She became a peer college counselor so she could pass hope along. "I wanted other students to go to college with me," Jenny explained.

At the Alliance's summer symposium in Washington D.C., Jenny met scientists at the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Science Foundation who had all immigrated from Central or South America. "They made me feel like if they can do it, I can do it too."

Through the Alliance's summer stipend, Jenny was able to shadow her college professor in Arizona. She studied buffellgrass, a very dry, crispy grass that catches fire easily. She created mathematical models to make sense of her field data. Using numbers, Jenny could see which areas the grass could grow safely in and where it needed to be uprooted. She learned that math could have a real-world impact. "That's when I knew that this is what I wanted to do."

Jenny recently obtained her driver's license and was able to get a work permit. She was hired at the CBOL corporation, an engineering company that manufactures products for "anything that flies" where she works as a project coordinator. Her main area of focus is South America.

Jenny plans to return to school and earn her master's degree, either specializing in some form of math or in education. She hopes to one day to find a job in a university lab or a math department.