This letter was written by a former peer adviser for the CS department, as part of their UWP 101 class. It does not reflect any official stance of the CS department, solely the writer’s.

To a new computer science student:

Congratulations! You’ve decided to be a part of computer science (CS) here at UC Davis. It wasn’t exactly easy to get where you are now, as you’ve probably heard from others. It’s true, though - entrance into the two CS majors are getting more and more competitive each year. You made it, though, and you’ll be registering for classes soon. Afterwards, you’ll be on your way to your first quarter here. As somebody who was sitting in that exact spot you’re in right now, I have some pieces of advice I’d like to share.

**Start making connections with your peers and professors.**

Whether you’re looking for a job or applying to graduate school, references and letters of recommendation are important. The person who could be recommending you to your next job could be sitting right next to you. Make some friends in and out of your CS classes. Some of these classes require pair programming, and in industry you’ll often be working in a team. Knowing how to communicate and work in a team is critical, and employers are always looking for those soft skills.

Get to know your professors, too. I got accepted into graduate school here at Davis because I had three good letters of recommendation from my professors. They knew me well because I went to their office hours, and participated in class. Your letters of recommendation will be far stronger when your professors know you. Plus, you might be able to help out with their research as an undergraduate researcher, and get elective credit for it, too!
Your general education classes and upper division units are there for you to explore.

Us advisers are not a fan of students doing four or five CS or STEM classes in one quarter. One CS class by itself can be pretty time consuming and difficult. Imagine taking four or five of those at once. Besides, variety keeps life interesting. If you still have general education classes or upper division units to take, mix it up and throw one of them into a quarter when you’re able to. Take something that seems interesting to you, or something that you’ve always wanted to learn about. Don’t worry about if it’s going to be easy or not. When are you going to have an opportunity like this in your life again, to learn about almost anything you’ve ever wanted to? The best class I’ve taken at Davis wasn’t one of the numerous CS or STEM classes I’ve taken. It was a music critiquing class I took with a retired music professor. I had no idea how to critique music, but I took the class anyway because it seemed interesting. In the end, I looked forward to going back to that class every week, and classes like those are the best ones.

There’s a life outside the basement of Kemper.

Kemper Hall is where the CS department is based. The CSIF, the computer labs for the CS department, are in the basement of Kemper. It’s called the Dungeon for a reason. You’re going to get well acquainted with this place, but you don’t need to live down there. You live in a small college town that’s full of things to do. In addition, you live close to Sacramento and the Bay Area, both very big places that are full of more things to do. Enjoy life outside Kemper, doing things that you enjoy. Just like how there’s a work-life balance in industry, the same concept applies to school. I like biking, so on a whim one day at 5 AM I decided to bike to Sacramento and watch the sun rise by Tower Bridge. Moments like those are what you’ll remember from college, not sitting in the Dungeon working on your assignments.

Well worth the effort.
Failure happens.

It's going to be a tough transition here. If you're a freshman, you'll be living out on your own for the first time, expected to take care of yourself and make your own decisions. For transfer students, the jump from a community college (or even another four-year) can be rough. Out of state and international students are getting used to an entirely different state and country in addition to the above. The CS classes you'll be taking can be quite difficult - possibly more difficult than any other class you've taken in your life so far.

At some point here, you'll end up failing. I have, plenty of times. That doesn't necessarily mean an F in a class. Maybe you didn't get that internship or on-campus job you wanted, or you didn't do as well as you hoped in something. If that happens, realize that you're not a failure. It happens to all of us, even if we don't like to talk about it. The best thing you can do is pick yourself up, learn from your mistakes, and move on. The next time you're in that situation, you'll be better prepared.

Realize when to ask for help.

Occasionally, we can let pride get the better of us and not ask for help, even when we're struggling. Remember, your tuition goes to pay for all of these campus resources. If you recognize that you're struggling, get help now, rather than waiting. Whether it's for classes, graduate school, employment, or almost anything else, there's somebody on this campus that can help you along on your path. If you don't know where to get help, ask one of us advisers. We can point you in the right direction.

Finally…

Make some memories while you're here. Get your work done, but enjoy it. The next few years will be over more quickly than you think. It was definitely that way for me.

Sincerely,
Somebody who was there