

“What Is That BS?”

by Alejandro Rivera-Becerra

I have enormous appreciation for the academic skills that I have developed and the scientific knowledge I've acquired. I also remember a couple of lessons from my everyday activities at UB.

One of them took place in the Fall of 1991, when I first came to UB. One day, just a few weeks after my arrival in the U.S., I was standing in line at what used to be Norton's cafeteria. It was lunch time, and the place was crowded and noisy. My turn to order came, and to my surprise there was a lady on the other side of the food station asking me what I wanted, but whose accent I couldn't understand. I asked for spaghetti, and then she mumbled something – which I later discovered was, “What kind of sauce do you want, plain sauce or meat sauce?” I had arrived in the U.S. thinking my English was not too bad, and this led me to be proud and unwilling to recognize that I hadn't understood. I thought that instead of admitting I hadn't understood, I would be clever by asking, “What's the difference?” At that point the woman stared at me, as did the people around me who were dead silent in disbelief. The woman then proceeded to say very slowly, “Meat sauce has meat, and plain sauce does not.” At that point I was too embarrassed and didn't care; all I wanted to do was to leave. But I learned something: it is O.K. to say, “I don't understand, could you please repeat what you said?”

A few days later I had an opportunity for practicing this lesson. I was in my Design of Experiments class and Professor Severo was discussing ways to avoid introducing prejudice into an experiment. He wrote the word “bias” on the board, and at that time I did not know its meaning nor its pronunciation. However, I had learned from my previous experience that it was O.K. to ask.

To me the word “B-I-A-S” was pronounced “BS.” So I leaned over to my classmate and asked, “What is that BS the professor just wrote on the board?” My classmate turned to me and asked how long I had been here and what people were teaching me! When I discovered what “BS” meant I was relieved I didn't raise my hand and ask the professor, “What is that BS you just wrote on the board?” So I learned that it is O.K. to ask but you must exercise some caution!

Alejandro Rivera-Becerra is from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. In 1993, he received an M.S. in Industrial Engineering, and in 1998 he received an M. Eng. in Civil Engineering from UB. Currently, he is finishing his doctoral program in Industrial Engineering at UB.