Brenda Payan was nervous about leaving her rural hometown of Price, Utah, to attend the University of Utah. She didn’t know what to expect about living in a big city or going to a major university.

Then she discovered ACCESS, a U program for women in science, engineering and mathematics. The summer experience provides incoming female students with a scholarship and an opportunity to work with mentors on campus to help prepare them for their college years.

"I was really reserved when I came to the university," said Payan, who is now a sophomore in biomedical engineering. "I didn’t think I would know how to work with the resources available here as a student. But as an ACCESS student, the program really helped me break out more."

The ACCESS program launched in 1992 under the university’s College of Science and began accepting engineering students for the first time in 2017, said engineering associate instructor Stacy Firth.

"The idea of the program is to create a cohort of women students. They come and live on campus one summer and study together under an interdisciplinary course," Firth said. "It’s really an important program."

For the summer semester, students engage in projects in engineering, chemistry, biology, physics, and math. Then they are given the opportunity to work with mentors in the fall semester of their first year of college and in a research lab during their spring semester.

Payan liked her experience in the program so much, she became a teacher’s assistant for ACCESS the following summer.

"It gives you a sense of community," she said. "All of the people in the ACCESS program are in science or engineering so it’s comforting to have people who are going through the same things."

Today, Payan is working in a research lab that is focused on genetic editing, but she isn’t sure where her biomedical engineering studies will ultimately take her. "I might go into research because I really like the lab I’m working in right now," she said.

The first in her family to attend college, the 19-year-old student said she’s embraced university life thanks to the ACCESS mentors who guided her as well as the encouragement she received from College of Engineering Dean Richard B. Brown, whom she met her first year in school.

"The ACCESS program helped me form the connections I needed, including with the dean," she said. "It really takes students seriously."