

From humble roots, Diaz guides Latino students to success



Viridiana Diaz, right, is interviewed during a recent edition of the Feria de Educacion. Diaz has been a key part of Sac State's efforts to help Latino/a students succeed. (Sacramento State/Erica Perez)

By Cynthia Hubert

Inside a Bay Area migrant camp trailer where her family lived after arriving from Mexico, young Viridiana Diaz began dreaming of a different kind of future.

She wanted to learn English. She wanted a stable job with benefits. She wanted more opportunities than her mother, who labored in seasonal jobs in agricultural fields and canneries. "I didn't know I could dream bigger than that," she said.

But a few years later, while she was a student at McClatchy High School in Sacramento, a counselor from Sacramento State's College Assistance Migrant Program convinced her that larger goals were within her reach.

"Sac State completely transformed my life. Every year, I become a new version of myself, because the University has given me the opportunity for growth."

Her mother had little formal education, and no one in her family had attended college. With help from CAMP and other Sac State programs, Diaz decided she was going to break the cycle.



“I felt I didn’t have much of a choice,” she said. “I looked at how a lack of financial security affected me and my family. I wanted something different.”

Diaz went on to obtain not one but four degrees from Sac State: a bachelor of arts in Communication Studies, a master of art in Spanish, a second master of Art in History and a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy.

Her career at Sac State has spanned nearly two decades. She currently is the University’s associate vice president of Strategic Student Support Programs, overseeing academic advising, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and other support for first-generation, migrant, undocumented, and other underserved students.

The programs are a bedrock of Sac State’s efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate Latino students, culminating this week in its selection as a recipient of a coveted national Seal of *Excelencia* certification.



Viridiana Diaz's life experiences helped position her to provide assistance and support for students at Sac State. (Photo courtesy of Viridiana Diaz)

Diaz sees herself in every student who comes through her office, she said.

Born and raised in Mexicali, Baja California, she immigrated to the United States with her mother and two brothers when she was 12.

“Poverty in Mexico was all around us,” she recalled. “There were no opportunities for work. In America, you could at least earn a living. You could have a roof over your head and buy food for your family. It was survival for us.”

While the family was living in a small migrant camp in Oakley, government migrant educators brought the children school supplies and drove them to the library to check out books.

“For me it was like Christmas to get a backpack with a ruler, crayons, pencils,” Diaz said. “I filled up that backpack with as many books as I could, and I started learning English.” By the time she enrolled in school months later, she “felt pretty comfortable” with the language, she said.

But it was not until the CAMP counselor came to McClatchy that Diaz began seriously thinking about college.

The counselor was relentless in encouraging Diaz to complete the enrollment process, helping her to fill out the appropriate paperwork and complete other pre-college tasks.

“As a first-generation student, I didn’t know what it took to go to college,” she said. “There wasn’t an understanding of the benefits of college in my family. My mom’s dream was that I would work in an office or in a bank, a place where I didn’t have to do physical labor. In her mind, that would have meant that I had made it.”

When she first set foot on the Sac State campus, Diaz was insecure about her chances of succeeding. “I had every red flag imaginable. I was an English learner, I had low SAT scores, I had financial obstacles,” she said. “I was dealing with a lot of guilt about my family’s situation, and a feeling of insecurity that I didn’t belong.”

She took advantage of tutoring, advising and mentoring programs offered through CAMP and Sac State’s Educational Opportunity Program. EOP serves promising students who have academic or financial obstacles.

Eventually, “I was able to take off the armor,” she said. “I used EOP for math tutoring, and CAMP for emotional and social support. I felt lighter, like I had family around me. That allowed me to push forward.”

Those programs and others across Sac State are now translating into higher graduation rates for Latino students, and better outcomes for all students, she said.

Diaz and her staff members stand as powerful symbols. Their offices in the River Front Center represent “a place where students know they are not going to be judged, where they can let their guard down, where they can see others who are going through the same things that they are, and who survived and thrived,” she said.

Visitors feel comfortable telling their stories, speaking their native language, and listening to familiar music. A refrigerator holds treats and breakfast items. The scent of freshly brewed coffee wafts through the building.

For Diaz, Sac State is home. She wants students to feel the same way.

“Sac State completely transformed my life,” she said. “Every year, I become a new version of myself, because the University has given me the opportunity for growth.

“Sac State made it possible for me to believe that a different life is possible for everyone.”

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