

At CAMP, students from migrant backgrounds find a haven



Maribel Betancourt, left, and Alondra Villapondo both found the embrace of community through their association with the University's College Assistance Migrant Program. (Courtesy photos)

By Dixie Reid

Maribel Betancourt was proud of her hardworking Latino parents, who picked, pruned, and peeled fruit at an orchard in Granite Bay. At school, though, she was embarrassed, because her mostly white classmates were the children of lawyers, doctors, nurses, and teachers.

“Growing up, I never felt represented within my peers, teachers, or the community,” she said. “I never felt proud of my background.”

Then Betancourt came to Sacramento State, a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution where more than a quarter of the students are Latino, and was accepted into the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP).

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Since 1981, federally funded CAMP has offered first-year support to thousands of students from migrant and farmworker backgrounds. The program helps them learn skills they will need to succeed at Sac State, and to graduate.

The success of CAMP, and an ongoing commitment to intentionally serve Latino students, earned Sacramento State a prestigious Seal of *Excelencia* for 2020. Only five institutions earned the designation this year, joining the elite group of 14 *Excelencia* institutions nationwide.

“I had always felt ashamed of sharing what my parents did, but CAMP exposed me to a whole community of migrant students whose parents work in agriculture, and that empowered me,” Betancourt said.

“CAMP also exposed me to professionals who shared stories that resonated with me, which is important in my professional journey. It reminds me to always uplift my community and those who follow after me.”

Betancourt graduated in Spring 2020 with a bachelor’s degree in Social Work. She’s now pursuing a master’s in Counseling at Sac State and expects to graduate in 2023.

“Sac State’s efforts on behalf of Latinx students is crucial to the success of the Latino community,” she said. “As a first-generation Latina in college, asking for help was nerve-racking and uncommon within my culture, but Sacramento State’s equity programs helped me navigate college and are a huge part of my success.”

Alondra Villapando, a Child Development major, found an unexpected second family in CAMP.

She grew up in Rio Vista, a small town in the Sacramento River Delta, and was the first in her family to attend college. Her mother is a single parent and farmworker who brought her two children from Mexico to give them better opportunities.

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“Being Hispanics, we come from families that are very close, and for us to leave our family to get an education was very hard,” Villapando said. “CAMP is a place for all of us to become a family. The amount of support and love we are shown makes me feel at home.”

CAMP is invaluable, she said, because first-generation students often have no one in their life to talk to about the challenges of being in college.

“I never once felt that I was alone or helpless, because they were there,” Villapando said. “These programs help Latinx students have a better experience and motivate them to get the education that their parents couldn’t.”

Her plan is to work as a school counselor after graduation in 2023. She hopes to advise young, first-generation students as they make their way into higher education.

Published: October 1, 2020