

ASU honors 1st-generation college students

Panel shares experiences navigating university at Watts College dinner

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Irma Carmona's parents were very proud when they learned she had received a college scholarship, she said — an important step as she was about to become the first in her family to enroll in a university.

But there was one problem. Carmona's scholarship only covered tuition, a fact she felt she just couldn't share with her mom and dad.



Chandra Crudup (from left), Watts College associate dean of inclusive design for equity and access and a social work clinical associate professor, moderates a panel discussion featuring Watts College Director of Academic Services Irma Carmona, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Professor Jesenia Pizarro and Watts College alumnus Ivan Quintana. Photo by Mark J. Scarp/ASU

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Carmona, a member of a panel of first-generation college students who are now Arizona State University faculty, staff and alumni, told her story at a recent First Generation Student Dinner that honored such students' special pride, challenges and accomplishments.

"My parents were so proud of me that I had got the scholarship that I didn't have the heart to tell them that it didn't cover housing. I didn't want my parents to have to take out a loan for any of that," said Carmona, the current director of academic services at the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions (<https://publicservice.asu.edu/>), which sponsored the dinner.

"So I reached out to my aunt and asked her if she would be willing to co-sign for a loan, and she did it," she said.

Carmona said she knew she would have to get a part-time job to repay the loan, which she did. But to this day, her parents still don't know about the arrangement. Carmona agreed to share the story for this article because her parents are unlikely to read it.

More stories and advice from Carmona and two other panelists at the dinner — representing faculty, staff and alumni — were met with laughs and nods of recognition from attendees, who, like them, went where no one in their families had gone before. The panel was moderated by Watts College Associate Dean for Inclusive Design for Equity and Access Chandra Crudup (<https://search.asu.edu/profile/676159>), who is also an associate professor in the School of Social Work (<https://socialwork.asu.edu/>).

Approximately 45% of the Watts College's 8,000-plus students are the first in their families to attend college. The college resumed its annual event April 6 in downtown Phoenix for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ivan Quintana, who graduated in May 2022 with bachelor's degrees in both criminology and criminal justice as well as public service and public policy, now works at Mesa Community College, where he attended classes before enrolling at ASU. His focus is TRIO, a group of federally funded programs that assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Quintana, whose parents attended school through eighth grade, said he faced many obstacles, starting when he first immigrated from Mexico to the United States at age 18. Fortunately, he said, he was able to emulate older siblings who went to school ahead of him.

Quintana said he remembered arriving in what he thought was appropriate attire for college: a pressed white dress shirt and slacks. His classmates, however, favored a much more casual dress code “in flip-flops and shorts.”

Finances were another major challenge, he said.

“People weren’t kidding around when they called me a broke college student,” Quintana said, recalling how he nearly dropped out during his first semester, telling his mother he might have to delay his graduation and work full time for a while.

“She had a little rainy day fund, and she sent me \$500,” he said. “So I was able to buy books for the semester, put down a payment on my tuition, and I even could pay for a haircut, (as) I couldn’t afford it. Not much has changed,” he said with a laugh, pointing to his hair.

Professor Jesenia Pizarro of the Watts-based School of Criminology and Criminal Justice (<https://ccj.asu.edu/>) talked about being conflicted over a decision to transfer universities.

Pizarro said she was admitted into college via the Educational Opportunity Program. She was unaware of how tuition worked and only applied to one nearby private university, which was suggested by her high-school guidance counselor.

Once she started classes, she realized the tuition was \$12,000 a year without housing, and that she could not afford to pay it. She recounted having to work full time and still needing her parents to chip in for tuition with the little they had, despite the scholarship and financial aid. Later, she heard from a friend attending a nearby public institution, which also admitted EOP students, that she could attend for about one-third of what she was currently paying.

“I remember going to my advisor (at the first school), and I explained to her my problem, and that I needed to transfer,” Pizarro said. “She looked at me and shamed me, and said, ‘Well, how much do you think you’re worth?’ And I am happy that I had enough savvy, smartness, to say, ‘Well, that’s easy for you to say. You’re not paying my tuition.’ And so I transferred. It was one of the best decisions I ever made since it set me on the path to where I am today.”

Graduate student Martin Cordova-Paredes, who will earn his Master of Public Administration in May, attended the dinner. He is the first in his family to have earned a bachelor's degree and, next month, a master's. He recalled how he overcame his biggest challenge: navigating college in general.

"I found additional support systems that allowed me to be successful in navigating both undergrad and grad schools. I overcame these challenges by getting involved on campus," Cordova-Paredes said. "During my undergrad (years), I was part of the Undergraduate Student Government on the Downtown Phoenix campus, and in grad school, I am part of the Graduate and Professional Student Association. By getting involved, it made me more aware of the resources that are available to students at ASU."

Cordova-Paredes advised new first-generation students to create a network of people who will support them and build them up, as he did.

"Navigating academic institutions can be very challenging, and without prior knowledge of these institutions, it can become very overwhelming," he said. "But these institutions create the perfect opportunity for students to meet like-minded individuals who are in similar situations as you, or have instilled wisdom that they can pass along to you."



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