

## Manuel Cantu Testimony

Hello my name is Manuel Cantu, and my academic journey starts in a small rural city called McFarland. McFarland is a city that is over ninety percent Hispanic and similar to most small rural cities in the San Joaquin Valley. McFarland is home to many low income and immigrant families, and as a result of the low income area, the school district could obviously not receive the same funding from property taxes as the more affluent areas surrounding McFarland. This means McFarland had facilities and programs that some might consider sub-par. So, it is very easy for someone to look at McFarland and perceive it as a dead, and honestly, that is how I viewed my hometown for most of my life. It was not until I matured and started to recognize my success in college thus far, and started appreciating the role models around me, that I realized McFarland was a great place. I realized despite the apparent inequity in McFarland I still found myself ready and encouraged to succeed in higher education.

I was prepared because I was blessed with great parents and a great family. I acknowledge them because they are the real reason for my success. My grandparents emigrated here from Mexico with the Bracero program. They had hopes of living the American Dream. They would of course face many hardships but they managed to instill the idea of grit and determination into my parents. As a result of their efforts, both of my parents would eventually graduate from college and my father would also continue on to receive his Master's degree and become a school administrator. The stage had already been set for me to be more likely to succeed although I did not know it.

I was always looking at my environment and comparing it to other places and thinking McFarland was not good enough, but that was not the case. I came to realize that my parents, whom I thought of as successful, were a product of the McFarland I thought so poorly of. Many of the faculty members that taught at my schools were also Hispanic and they were also products of small rural cities like McFarland. Also, despite the low funding at our school many teachers put in the extra hours to bring students college readiness programs like AVID, and writing workshops for personal statements. Now that I look back I see the value in growing up in McFarland. Role models that looked like me surrounded me and led me to believe that anything could be possible.

My experience in higher education has been quite different than in high school. The financial burden of college forced me to spend two years at the local community college in Bakersfield before transferring to Fresno Pacific University. Although college was different and it took a while for me to adjust, my parents were always by my side. My parents would remind me to visit my counselor every week because I had to be ready to transfer as soon as possible, my parents reminded me to be productive with all of the extra time I had in the day, and they reminded me that in the end the degree would be worth all of the effort.

I would eventually transfer to Fresno Pacific with fifty-five units. Since I did not fully listen to my parents about being proactive with my courses it would come back to haunt me because I will now be graduating in five years instead of four, but I have no regrets and I am happy with my progress. The good thing about that minor mistake is that my younger brother would learn from me to become more proactive

and transfer to Fresno Pacific and be more prepared to graduate immediately. Once I was here at Fresno Pacific I saw it as the home stretch and so I have continued to put my nose down, hit the books and get the grades I need.

So if I could relate my story to the broader student population I would encourage students to try to find hope in their environment no matter what it is. Look for role models that will empower you to do your best. I wish there was a cookie cutter solution I could offer that would point you in the direction of said role model but that is a process you have to discover for yourself. I took my parents and other teachers for granted. Not until I used them as a resource did I begin to flourish and become more academically successful.

At Fresno Pacific University I was able to learn about many things that can help improve equity and student success. I work at my school as a Multicultural Peer Mentor, this is my favorite job on campus and I think it is a great step in the right direction to improve equity. As a multicultural peer mentor I am one of six students that serves a role model or friend to help first generation college students navigate through higher education. My department is funded by the ALAS program (Advancing Latino Academic Success). The great thing about this that we serve first generation college students; so any first generation student can potentially be a part of our program.

First generation students can often be lost in universities since they do not have that close family member to blaze the trail of higher education for them. Parents often do not understand the challenge that their child faces and so resentment can grow between parent and child. First generation students sometimes do not know how to manage their time outside of a high school setting; these students may also prioritize work over studying to help out their family's financial burdens; Students under DACA are also sometimes fearful of applying to government programs and college in general. It can be scary for students to be experiencing struggles and realize that their parents cannot help them despite the efforts of his or her parents. This can be very discouraging for students, so it is our job to bridge the gap for these students and be that role model to help them stay on track and succeed in higher education. As I mentioned before what helped me the most was having role models that looked like me, that are wiser than me, and that could lead me through new experiences. We want to be that for our students and equip all of our students as best we can.

Universities should provide students the opportunity to attend different social awareness programs, be a part of different scholarship programs, and interact with people of different social spheres. Universities need to be able to encourage leaders to be aware and truly represent their student body. I believe students benefit the most when they have mentors they can relate to. That doesn't mean it has to be someone of the same race can only be their leader but students should know that their leaders are competent and considerate enough to help them out. Students should know that if they apply themselves then they would not be unjustly held from success. Hard work should be the only thing that gauges how successful someone can be.

If you come from a humble place, use that to your advantage, showcase your ability to overcome adversity and rise to the challenge. That is a valuable skill that

you get the privilege to have. If you are a person that comes from inequity and succeeds do your best to become a role model to other people. I drew inspiration from many people who I did not even know. Every college acceptance letter that I heard about from an upperclassman was a reminder to me in my youth that anything is possible for a student in McFarland. You can inspire people just by your own personal success and the testimony you can share. Lets help start a trend of generational success.