

# College Student Journey: How Supportive Environments Help Students Reach Their Dreams

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Imagine setting foot in a country you have always dreamed of visiting, but you don't know the language or the culture, or where to find help. That feeling is probably very similar to the one a first-generation student has the first day of classes at a college or university. Maybe their family's hopes and dreams are riding on their academic success, adding even more pressure to prevail. As a Foundation focused on ensuring Latino student success in Arizona, this scenario is quite familiar.



Challenges abound for first-generation students. Often these students aspire to complete a postsecondary degree but have little knowledge about the college-going process. How do these students fulfill their postsecondary ambitions? How do they find support systems once on a college or university campus?

In Arizona, [Be A Leader Foundation](#) addresses these challenges by providing transition, mentoring services and leadership training to first generation students. The organization's mission is to increase the number of college-going students in Arizona by providing them with the tools and resources needed to become college bound, focused, and prepared.

Since 2008, Helios Education Foundation and Be A Leader Foundation have collaborated on student success programs, first beginning with Project Help and most recently on the Matriculation Specialists program. The Matriculation Specialists program places specialists working on a comprehensive matriculation curriculum that supports [Phoenix Union High School District](#) students from the beginning of their senior year through postsecondary enrollment the following fall semester. This 12-month curriculum focuses on providing students with information and support to complete critical tasks to ensure matriculation. The ultimate goal is to increase the number of Phoenix Union students who transition into a postsecondary institution the fall after graduation.

"Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to enriching the lives of individuals in both Arizona and Florida by creating opportunities for postsecondary success," said Vince Yanez, Senior Vice President, Arizona Community Engagement, Helios Education Foundation. "Through this partnership, we are able to help close the degree-completion gap by providing first-generation Latino students with the support systems they need to be successful," concluded Yanez.

Now a freshman at Arizona State University, Silvia Rodriguez is a 2018 graduate of Carl Hayden High School in southwest Phoenix. She worked with Be A Leader Foundation and received the guidance that propelled her to enroll at ASU. Rodriguez says she would not be where she is today without the program. Through the guidance provided by Hanna Solomon, a matriculation specialist with the Be A Leader Foundation within the Phoenix Union High School District, Ms. Rodriguez received the Obama Scholarship which alleviated the financial pressures of attending a four-year university.

"My only hope was getting into Arizona State University with the Obama Scholarship. For that to happen, I needed help filling out my FAFSA, which I really knew nothing about," Silvia Rodriguez explains. "It was a big process to fill out the FAFSA because there were certain documents I needed (to prove parent's income). Hannah was the one who helped me get them."

"Our main job is to work with seniors, counseling staff, guidance staff in Phoenix Union High School District." Explained Solomon, "We work with seniors throughout the entire admissions experience, from the beginning of the school year, all the way to graduation. Everything from deciding which test to take, the admissions process, applying, FAFSA, scholarships, grants, loans ... everything so that by the time we hit March and April, we know where each student is going, we know how much they have secured, we are ready to roll."

Both Rodriguez and Solomon are committed to continuing their supportive relationship far beyond their initial goal of achieving ASU admission. In fact, Solomon will support Rodriguez's completion of the FAFSA yet again this academic year. "I love watching the curiosity that students still possess, the wonder, the ambition they still have. I think a lot of students are insanely smart, they just do not have the resources, or the tools, or the relationships to develop that and put it forward into action," says Solomon.