Leadership for the Future

Advocacy and intentional support for organizations proven to help student success can transform lives, says a Phi Theta Kappa honoree.

BY MICHAEL AGUILAR
THE WORLD TODAY SEEMS MORE COMPLICATED THAN EVER before. This year’s college graduates will not only face perplexing economic problems, they also will face a divided country and an uncertain political climate. As we imagine what the future will look like, each of us has a responsibility to consider our role in shaping it. It is no secret that, at times, my generation has questioned whether we are up for this challenge.

Few people have a more direct effect on the country’s future than you, our community college leaders. You ensure that students like me have educational opportunity. You create pathways that lead to transfer and career success. You advocate for the most diverse segment of American higher education. Most of all, you make stories like mine possible. I want to describe for you some of the challenges I faced as a first-generation college student. But I also want to make it clear how thoughtful policies and forward-looking administrators can make my story not a notable exception, but an exceptional rule.

My time as a community college student has been a transformative experience. On paper, my story was not supposed to end in success. My parents never finished high school because they became teenaged parents of three children. They separated at a young age, and my father struggled as a single parent. By the age of 18, I had lived in 16 different houses. In middle and high school, I was frequently suspended for bad behavior. When I found myself attending a disciplinary school, I was angry at a society that seemed to push me there. The facts of my story strongly suggested that I would become another young man of color trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Yet my story took a hopeful and unexpected turn the day I set foot on the campus of my local community college, Lone Star College-CyFair. I found professors who cared about me as an individual and took the time to mentor me. I found a community that embraced diversity and saw my background as a strength rather than as a weakness. Most of all, I found a college that gave deliberate strategic support for an organization that changed my life: Phi Theta Kappa. You might have heard that Phi Theta Kappa students have a 91 percent student success rate, compared to 38 percent for all community college students. Like many, you may be tempted to assume that those numbers are the result of self-selection; successful students join honor societies, right? But consider this: non-PTK students with similar GPAs have only a 57 percent student success rate. What accounts for that difference? Perhaps my story can provide an answer.

When I accepted Phi Theta Kappa membership, I discovered a new world of opportunity. I had only just begun to see myself as a successful student, and I still harbored doubts about whether I could achieve my goals. PTK provided me with a supportive community of like-minded students. It also gave me access to mentorship through my advisor, who pushed me to begin dreaming bigger than I ever had dared before. Most importantly, PTK gave me the platform to put my intellectual curiosity into practice. Because I was considered a discipline problem in high school, I encouraged my chapter to research the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline. We worked with our college administration and community leaders to develop a mentorship program in the same disciplinary center at which I was once a student. I must admit something to you: I was a little embarrassed when the principal at this school for suspended students recognized me! Yet I was filled with pride to witness my chapter’s vision become a reality. Throughout the fall 2016 semester, 67 community college students mentored over 400 at-risk high school students. This project connected my scholarly interests with PTK’s focus on servant leadership. I took away from this project an understanding of how I could use my education to make a positive impact on my community. I may have started community college as a discipline problem, but I stand before you today as a Jack Kent Cooke Undergraduate Transfer Scholar who will start this fall at Washington University in St. Louis.

Success does not happen by accident. It happens because you, our community college leaders, intentionally ensure that students arriving on your campuses are connected to programs and opportunities that make a difference. I am keenly aware that my accomplishments are not simply the result of my own hard work. They are the result of investments made by people like you. I am here because leaders at my college chose to support programs like Phi Theta Kappa that are proven to help students succeed. I want to state this as clearly as I can: the work you do matters. Community college is the future of higher education, and student success is not just a slogan; it is a reality I have experienced firsthand. I am honored to serve as one of many examples of that success, but I am also looking to the future. I hope each one of you will do the same.

As you think about what the world will look like five, ten, or twenty years from now, ask yourself: who will be leading it? I hope your answer includes community college students. As we respond to the transformation of the workforce and consider the future of higher education, students like me need advocates. I can think of no one better to fill that role than the women and men who lead our community colleges. Thank you for your commitment to students, and thank you for making my story possible.

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