

ACHIEVING THE 'American Dream'

Students share how they drew their path to Elon and their experiences while here

AMERICAN | from cover

Making it to Elon

Elon falls short in this as well as in the freshman population which is less than seven percent. The national Latino/Hispanic freshman student body which is 19.3 percent nationwide according to the The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016 report.

Sophomore Mackenzie Martinez grew up in an upper middle-class household. As a fourth-generation Latina and third-generation college student, she knew that college was always going to be an option for her. She said that the educational resources she had growing up were due to the affluent areas in which she grew up and studied.

"With my more privileged background, we lived in kind of the better school districts," Martinez said. "We went to the better schools, we had the newer desks, we had fancy computers, and we had newer textbooks, so I feel like that definitely helped me get to where I am academically and helped push me to bring me to Elon."

While Martinez knew she would end up in a four-year institution, Cisneros struggled to wrap her mind around the finances and the college admission process. Even when she became a teaching fellow, she did not want to get her hopes up. When she became an Odyssey scholar, a program aimed at financially and academically supporting students in her position, she still had her doubts of whether or not she would attend Elon.

"When they [Odyssey] called me to tell me I got into the program, I thought, so how much is it? How much money did I get?" Cisneros said.

Cisneros did not tell anyone that she had gotten accepted as an Odyssey scholar until she made some calls to the financial aid office, with the help of her high school principal. She came to find out she had received a full ride.

"This was what we've been working for," Cisneros said. "Seeing all your work pay off because it was something that I had worked for from kindergarten to 12th grade. My only goal in life was to get to college."

Cisneros and Martinez differ in their paths to Elon. Though on different sides of the socio-economic scale, their experiences as being the only student of color from high school in their upper level honors and AP classes to college are similar.

One of Elon's 2018-2019 institutional priorities is to have an unprecedented university commitment to diversity and global engagement. This includes objectives and initiatives for efforts focused on global engagement, such as the Latino/Hispanic working group led by Sylvia Munoz, associate director for the Center for Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity Education (CREDE), and Vanessa Bravo, associate professor of communications.

As the report is on its final stages before going public, Munoz said that some of the major themes of it deal with are finding more resources for Latino/Hispanic student body, more support for them and their families from the moment they begin their application until af-



Senior Mirrella Cisneros (left) is embraced by sophomore Mackenzie Martinez after leaving a Latinx Hispanic Union meeting Sept. 24.

DIEGO PINEDA | ENTERPRISE STORY COORDINATOR

ter they graduate.

Through research, programming, surveys, focus groups among others the working group found that the admissions process for Latino/Hispanic students needs improvement so everyone like Cisneros parents who do not speak English can learn about the school through a bilingual website.

"We don't need a mass of students to provide these services," Munoz said. "If we have one family that needs to get all the resources that they need to be able to be at the same level as everybody."

Being the only minority

Munoz said that once students are at Elon, orientation is also another of the themes the working group reported about and how Latino/Hispanic experiences differ inside the classroom from the student and faculty perspective. She said that faculty and staff at Elon that identify as Latino/Hispanic are 2.7 percent. Many of these are concentrated in the language and physical plant/environmental services department.

Whenever Martinez walks into a classroom for the first time, she automatically takes count of how many people of color and women are in the room and where she stands in that sense.

"I keep in mind that there are people who look at me," Martinez said. "And there are people who may have never seen another Hispanic woman at a really expensive private university."

For Cisneros, her experiences of being the only minority in the classroom growing up led her to become an education major. She is pursuing a career in teaching to help fix the inequality that exists in the education system, especially for Latinos and people of color in the U.S.

"There are many institutions and systems in place that kind of make it harder for people of color and for Latino students like me to be as successful as other students," Cisneros said. "We are not completely educated on the fact that in many ways, the system is meant to work that way; it's meant to work against you, not for your benefit."

Randy Williams, associate vice president for campus engagement, the Latino/Hispanic, helped charge the Latino/Hispanic working group

along with Brooke Barnett, associate provost.

"It's important to have representation," Williams said. "For all people, it's a value to see your identities reflected in the classroom and the administration and in spaces where you receive services."



THIS IS ABOUT CHANGING THE NARRATIVE THAT LATINOS ARE 'OTHERS'

SYLVIA MUNOZ
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE CREDE

From 2000 to 2015, the college-going rate among Hispanic high school graduates grew from 22 to 37 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education. However, about 65 percent of those students go to crowded or underfund-

ed community colleges.

"When you look at elite schools, the actual divide or gap between white students and black and Latino students has gotten wider in selective schools versus enrollment in open access schools," Williams said.

When comparing Elon to peer institutions, the enrollment of freshmen Latino/Hispanic students is lower. The closest figure to Elon's numbers is Ithaca College, with an enrollment of 8.3 percent. The enrollment rate is slightly higher at Leigh University, Loyola University and the College of William and Mary, at 9.5 percent, 10.2 percent and 10.6 percent, respectively. Rollins College and Santa Clara University figures are more representative of the national average, reaching 15.2 percent and 17.2 percent.

"I can't imagine what that would have felt like to see someone that looks like you to go to college," Cisneros said. "And feel like 'Oh, maybe my aunt goes to college so she can help me and she can give me advice.'"

Balancing the gap

With Elon's core value focus on diversity, inclusion, global engagement, it is important that the school is able to support the growth of Latino/Hispanic students in the U.S., institutional representation of the community and the complexity of this identity to provide the tools and resources for the community.

"The working group is to make recommendations on Elon's policies and practices to make the university a more supportive academic, work and living environment for Latino/Hispanic students, faculty and alumni," Williams said.

Efforts such as the working group and the merger for the CREDE were in response to the growing number of Hispanic students. Williams said these efforts are to prepare and support these students at Elon graduation.

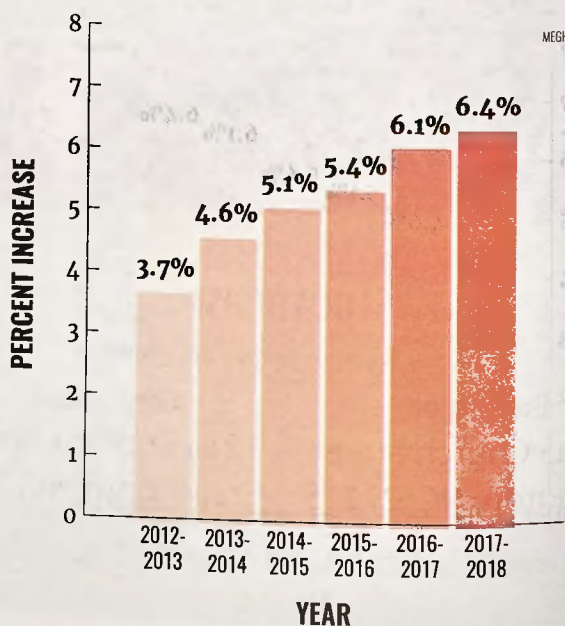
Munoz said that besides the report of the working group mentions, it also highlights the need to connect with Hispanic alums and support the contributions of Latino U.S. Martinez says that her community and success is largely just representation and to end when she graduates.

"Not only do I want to be proud for myself and make me proud," Martinez said. "I want to make that little Hispanic look on TV and never see someone who looks like her, I want her proud."

The working group report hope to start implementing their initiatives and when once the report is finalized, she said that though Latinos do good on paper, she has learned from their conversations that their experiences are the best.

"This is about changing the narrative that Latinos are," Munoz said. "Obviously we want to concentrate on the Latino population, but hopefully the changes are going to be made that will help other populations as well."

ENROLLMENT OF LATINO/HISPANIC STUDENTS AT ELON



SOURCE: SYLVIA MUNOZ
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