César Oyervides-Cisneros wants to make sure Latino students at UCLA have a smoother road

The senior administrator of campus initiatives at the Chicano Studies Research Center helps lead efforts to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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César Oyervides-Cisneros is helping make sure UCLA offers supportive infrastructure to better ensure Latino students can thrive on campus.

Madeline Adamo | September 15, 2022

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An eager student growing up in Fontana, California, César Oyervides-Cisneros enjoyed history and social sciences from a young age. He would later gravitate toward linguistics in high school. A native of Guanajuato, Mexico, Oyervides-Cisneros already spoke Spanish and English. French, German and Italian came next. Oyervides-Cisneros' German teacher agreed to his ambitious proposal of completing an entire year of German per semester and to start German III the following year.

"It's teachers like that who really take an interest in their students' learning, and who remove barriers for them while at the same time holding them to high standards of learning," said Oyervides-Cisneros, who spent his youth as a student and like many children of immigrants, also a "culture broker."

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He came to the United States when he was 2, which meant a lot of navigating the public school system on his own and translating for his Spanish-speaking parents at their medical visits, in the grocery store and at his own parent-teacher conferences. To succeed in the U.S. educational system, Oyervides-Cisneros knew he needed more than his encouraging parents could provide. A community of role models who prioritized uplifting others would be invaluable.

"That's the kind of educational community that I'm interested in," said Oyervides-Cisneros, senior administrator of campus initiatives at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center ⌹ where he helps lead the campus's efforts to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution, or HSI, by 2025. Having combined his perseverance, ambition and curiosity with the guidance of mentors to get into college and earn his degree, he strives to help the students he sees whose journeys are similar to his own thrive as well.

As an HSI, UCLA would be eligible for a range of federal grants to bolster educational programs, research training and academic attainment for Latino, low-income and other underrepresented students. These would include, for example, research opportunities through the National Science Foundation specifically designed for HSI students, and programs designed to encourage postgraduate study.

For UCLA to be designated an HSI, 25% of its students must identify as Latino and 35% of all undergraduates must be Pell Grant recipients. Currently, approximately 21% of UCLA undergraduates are Latino. Earning the designation isn't solely a moral imperative, though, it's about UCLA being a place that reflects the future of California.

"Over 50% of students enrolled in California primary and secondary schools are Hispanic or Latino, and close to 60% of California students are socio-economically disadvantaged in the 2021-22 school year," Oyervides-Cisneros said, citing recent data from the California Department of Education.

"This is why it is important for institutions that are close to reaching the HSI designation to reflect on their institutional practices, culture, resources and support systems to ensure they are ready to better serve these students," he said.

And while his parents, Ernesto and Irma, were encouraging when it came to school and going to college, Oyervides-Cisneros said they were initially skeptical of government aid, leaving him to independently — and persistently — seek the help of counselors to navigate the maze of college admissions and financial aid and once he got to UC Riverside, degree requirements.

Universities need to fill in knowledge gaps

The whole experience drove home to him that institutions have to provide more help students from underrepresented backgrounds, who are often first in their families to attend college. They often lack the resources and the knowledge of the college experience handed down from their parents to help them, he said.

Part of helping students succeed is doing more to make their presence feel normalized on campus, which means seeing faces like theirs at the front of classrooms and connecting with supportive faculty from various academic fields. Oyervides-Cisneros provides administrative support for the center's HSI Infrastructure Initiative. The center currently has searches for eight faculty hires specializing in Latino life (the first of up to 30 new scholars the center aims to recruit).

This year, the center is also welcoming its inaugural cohort of fellows (the first of 20 over five years) as part of the chancellor's postdoctoral fellowship program ⬀. Oyervides-Cisneros will also help administer the center's seed research grants.

Oyervides-Cisneros, who joined UCLA in May, brings the experiences that make him uniquely qualified for his new role at UCLA. He was a student leader at UC Riverside in 2005, as it was finalizing becoming the first UC campus to earn the HSI designation. He later held student-serving staff roles at the campus, in which he helped students see the value of education and service, and connected them to resources and internships.

Later he moved into more senior administrative roles and became well-versed in the federal and state grants that contribute to an institution's upward mobility for students, he said.

Ironically, had he felt more comfortable in college, Oyervides-Cisneros might not have ended up in his current role. Despite his interest, Oyervides-Cisneros said he didn't have the confidence to seriously pursue studying science because he felt like there wasn't a community to support him if he were to struggle.

"Sometimes people have a bit of a challenge pursuing something like astronomy or environmental science if it's not super apparent how to apply it to their own community," he said, adding that he thinks better basic life skills education in high school could be an effective way to get more first-generation students into science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

"I fear that we could lose talented individuals out of not having sufficient community support and confidence to pursue those types of degrees and interests," he said.

Finding his best destiny

After graduating, Oyervides-Cisneros pursued a fellowship through UCLA School of Law, which allowed him to channel his interest in policy, language and culture into his personal mission. Having seen the barriers his parents faced as immigrants, it was clear to Oyervides-Cisneros that education was not only about personal upward mobility, but a way to be responsive to the needs of one's community.

Oyervides-Cisneros ultimately earned his master's program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a choice he says was based on seeing the ripple effect of community building through education and service to first-generation students.

"I'm humbled by the fact that my parents did not have that awareness," said Oyervides-Cisneros, who brought his father and two brothers to the East Coast for the first time to attend his graduation from Harvard.

He went on to work at seven academic institutions and non-profits as a leader in equity, diversity and inclusion, at one point serving as director of federal relations and outreach at the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities.

His two most recent positions brought him back to UC Riverside where he served as an AmeriCorps program manager for the University Eastside Community Collaborative before getting promoted to director of the UCR College Corps.

But, Oyervides-Cisneros said, when he saw an opportunity at UCLA to help make campus a successful HSI, there was no question in his mind about rising to the challenge.

"I'm excited to see how this helps build community for Latinx students, scholars and campus in general," he said. "I think UCLA's ability to gather resources and people will get a lot of eyes on us to see what we develop in terms of models and new initiatives."