

## UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS- URBANA

### Grant helps Latino students find a home and a future in ACES department



URBANA - There's good news for high-achieving Latino high-school students who want to attend the University of Illinois and prepare for careers in such fields as food safety, dietetics, and nutrition research, said Margarita Teran-Garcia, a U of I professor in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition (FSHN) and a leader in its Multicultural Advocates in Nutritional Needs and Agriculture (MANNA) program.

"Next year, a USDA grant will begin to pay for the undergraduate education of four qualified Latino students who enroll in food science and human nutrition majors. That includes a \$10,000 yearly stipend plus a paid 12-week research experience each summer in the labs of College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) professors," she said.

The MANNA program complements ACES' New Biology Fellows, a program led by Latino professors that will recruit Hispanic students, provide them with scholarships and expose them to one-year research experiences in quantitative biology and informatics.

"Almost 20 percent of the state's population is now Latino, and over half of these Latinos are under the age of 25. Yet we have only 20 Latino students in our department," said Elvira de Mejia, a U of I associate professor of food chemistry and food toxicology.

According to de Mejia, many top Latino high-school students are unaware of the support that is available to them. Scholarships for Latinos sometimes go unused, and it's often possible to combine scholarships to cover the complete cost of college. But financial support is only part of the picture, she said.

"The Latino faculty members in ACES are committed to helping these young people succeed. We want to work with them through every step of the process, from helping them become academically fit to enter U of I classes by participating in ACES' Research Apprentice Program, then working with them as they move into more complex classes, and continuing to mentor them in our labs for a few hours a week while they are students here," she said.

Melissa Morales, a senior in FSHN, will soon present her research at the Experimental Biology 2011 annual meeting. Although she is now weighing whether to attend medical school or continue graduate studies in international food security, she said that she nearly missed out on her U of I experience.

Her classmate, Frances de la Torre, has studied abroad and hopes to obtain a Ph.D. in nutrition. As a teen, she didn't have big dreams either.

"When we were in high school, no one ever told us we could go to college, even though we were both in the top 10 percent of our class. There were college fairs, yes, and we'd pass around brochures. But no one asked us what we were interested in or encouraged us to apply. We knew it would be expensive, and no one in our families had done it," Morales said.

De la Torre was inspired by Professor Teran-Garcia when she was making her college decision. "It was refreshing to meet someone from a Mexican background who had such great credentials. It just made me want to work that much harder. I wanted to be a strong woman like her," she said.

Morales said, "I got involved in an internship called Abriendo Caminos, or "Clearing the Path," sponsored by the Robert Wood's Foundation. As an intern, I created lessons and taught six basic lessons on nutrition to Latino children. After that, I was hooked."

Latino students can also benefit from participation in Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANNRS), a club that helps minority students develop communication skills, build a resume, learn how to present their research to groups, and develop professionalism, de Mejia said.

Both students want to give back to the Latino community.

"Latinos have the second highest obesity rate in the country. I believe I have the potential to make a difference by passing on what I know about the diverse factors that contribute to this problem," said Morales.

Teran-Garcia and de Mejia know that when one person in a family or a community succeeds, others are inspired. That's why the two scientists look forward to a surge of Latino applicants for FSHN programs.

The professors have found resources to support four Hispanic students in next year's freshman class, but they're not stopping there. They want to see FSHN's student body mirror the state's diverse population, and FSHN department head Faye Dong is solidly behind them.

The pride de Mejia felt was evident as she turned to de la Torre and Morales over coffee in FSHN's Bevier Cafe. "You can become leaders now and empower others," she told them. "Education transforms you."

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