



CAMPUS Guides

EOP Celebrates 50 Years of Helping Students Navigate College

By **Monica Rodriguez**

When **Jessica M. Mendez** was accepted into the university four years ago, she knew little about the educational journey that she was about to begin.

One thing was clear, however.

"I wasn't sure how college worked or how I was going to make it through college independently as a first-generation student. I just knew I wanted to go to Cal Poly Pomona," says Mendez, an industrial engineering senior.

Cal Poly Pomona's **Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)** has guided Mendez since her freshman year through a series of programs and services that gave her the tools to make the most of her time in college.

"Without them, maybe it would have turned out differently," Mendez says.

Since it was established 50 years ago, EOP has assisted low-income students who are first in their families to attend college, according to **Leticia Guzman Scott**, executive director of Student Support & Equity Programs at Cal Poly Pomona. Scott oversees EOP, which has about 2,300 students this fall, along with **Renaissance Scholars** and the **Veterans Resource Center**.

EOP does much more than offer information on how to succeed in college. It provides workshops on financial literacy and budgeting, assistance in selecting a major and one-on-one tutoring. EOP prepares students to enter their chosen career or for graduate school. Perhaps most important is the network of advisors and students ready to help with any type of problem.

Challenges sometimes involve academic issues, but some students will find themselves without a place to live or food to eat, according to **Rebecca Aguiniga Cutler**, an academic advisor who is in her 35th year with the program. In those circumstances, students have turned to EOP for assistance.

"Some students find themselves feeling alienated because they're away from home. They are homesick, deeply homesick. We help them find their footing and feel more comfortable" she says. "No matter what the problem is, EOP stands ready to assist."

Most EOP students begin their Cal Poly Pomona journey with **Summer Bridge**, a five-week program that helps high school graduates transition to college. They live in the residence halls, attend classes, and participate in workshops and group advising sessions. Students bond within their cohort, says **Ruby Ramirez-Murillo**, a sociology senior.

Ramirez-Murillo initially found the large campus and unfamiliar faces a bit intimidating. After Summer Bridge, she didn't feel alone because she would see fellow EOP students on campus.

"A lot of us have similar

backgrounds and life experiences. That really helped," Ramirez-Murillo says. "EOP helped me create a sense of belonging."

Students say the relationships they established through Summer Bridge are some of the strongest they have at Cal Poly Pomona.

"We go through our college experience together and it helped create my support system," Mendez says. "EOP is my second family."



EOP advisor **Rebecca Aguiniga Cutler** and alumnus **Eric Lara** have kept in touch over the years.

Aguiniga Cutler Scholarship – for individuals who, like him, are first generation, underrepresented and of limited financial means. The scholarships are his way of honoring the program and the staff, as well as assisting new generations of students.

"That's my motivation, to give back. I'd do anything for EOP," says Lara ('03, electronics and computer engineering; '08, master's in education), who earned a doctorate in education from USC in 2011. He is currently associate dean of student success and equity at Mt. SAC.

Lara's scholarships are the first from an EOP alum, according to **Krista Spangler**, director of development for Student Affairs. She hopes Lara's gift may inspire others.

The Lara Family Scholarship will benefit an EOP student with a preference for those who are from La Puente, where Lara grew up. The Cutler Scholarship is open to any EOP student, preferably a junior or senior.

In 1999, after Lara was put on academic leave, he kept in touch with Cutler, who monitored his progress and offered encouragement until his return to the university and also throughout his undergraduate years.

"She was the person helping me through," Lara says. "She was the mentor, the one constant in my life."

After graduating in 2003, Lara worked as an engineer for two years. He later returned to Cal Poly Pomona to work as a retention coordinator and then academic advisor for the **Maximizing Engineering Potential (MEP)** program.

In 2013, a decade after earning his undergraduate degree, Lara spoke to a group of middle and high school students about his journey, beginning with the story of being "kicked out." That talk would be the first time he shared the secret with his mother.

Lara invited her and his aunt to attend. At the end, he approached his mom.

"She didn't believe it," Lara says. "She congratulated me and said, 'You should have told me.' "

KEEPING the Dream Alive

Alumnus Gives Back to the Program that Helped Him Succeed

By **Monica Rodriguez**

Eric Lara didn't want to disappoint his mother. When Cal Poly Pomona put him on academic leave because he twice failed a remedial algebra class, he kept it to himself.

It was the start of spring quarter 1999, and Lara, a freshman, learned that the "C" he needed had eluded him for the second time. Dejected, he thought his dream of becoming an engineer was over. Then he came out of his sadness.

"I'm a fighter. I don't quit," he says.

Lara, who was enrolled and active in the campus' **Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)**, sought out his EOP academic advisor **Rebecca Aguiniga Cutler**, **Jim Norfleet** (EOP director at the time) and others. He found the support and guidance that brought him back to the only college he wanted to attend, he says.

Decades later, Lara established two scholarships – the **Lara Family Scholarship** and the **Rebecca**

Support the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)

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