

## BALANCING RESPONSIBILITIES

During his time at Cal Poly Pomona, Escobar learned to grow and harvest a wide variety of fruits and vegetables on the university's Spadra Farm, fields and groves. He even got over his fear of heights by climbing ladders to harvest fruits from citrus trees.

"Working on the farm has been a crucial component as it bridged the gap between textbook knowledge and real-world application," he says.

Escobar was also a nontraditional student. He moved to Southern California with his wife and son Mario, who was a little over a year old at the time. Since then, the couple has welcomed a second son, Matteo, to the family.

To support his family, Escobar worked as a barista at Panera Bread on top of being a full-time student and working on the college farm crew. His prime hours for studying were late at night and early in the morning when his family was sleeping.

"Pursuing higher education while raising a family has been the toughest journey of my life," he says.

His parents' example – coming from Mexico to the United States as teenagers without any formal education or parental support – encouraged him to persevere. Scholarships from **Pine Tree Ranch, Dole Fresh Fruit** and the **Fruit Industries Endowment** helped ease the financial burden, while the **Children's Center** at Cal Poly Pomona provided a flexible schedule and nurturing environment for his son.

Faculty and staff in the Department of Plant Science soon noticed Escobar's efforts.

"His excellent grasp of agricultural knowledge and skill, his work ethic, and his leadership and engaging personality made him a well-respected part of the department," says Professor **Valerie Mellano**, the department chair.



Horsehill Wine comes from the vineyards at Cal Poly Pomona, including those near the Farm Store at AGRIsCAPES.

**"My experience at Cal Poly Pomona was more than extraordinary. The hands-on learning experience well exceeded my expectations."**

Now Escobar has come full circle: He's returned to Central California to work with Sunview, his old employer, growing table grapes – the very crop that his parents worked on, and the company where his father continues to work. In his new job, he assists in crop evaluation, pest management, irrigation and supervising farm work for the grower, which farms several thousand acres in the San Joaquin Valley and counts Walmart, Target, Sprouts, Whole Foods and Trader Joe's among its customers.

"It takes scientific knowledge to properly manage the resources necessary to produce an aesthetically pleasing cluster of grapes with good color, size, flavor and texture," Escobar says.

Mellano is confident that Escobar will be an agricultural leader who will ensure that Californians will have a safe and generous food supply in the future.

"His knowledge is exceptional and his innovative attitude is highly important to agricultural production," she says.

But one thing is certain: Escobar would not be where he is today without the polytechnic education he gained at Cal Poly Pomona.

"My experience at Cal Poly Pomona was more than extraordinary," he says. "The hands-on learning experience well exceeded my expectations."

## alumni

## ALUMNUS AND PROFESSOR RECEIVES INNOVATION AND LEADERSHIP AWARD



By **Monica Rodriguez**

Biological Sciences Professor **Steve Alas** has helped thousands of students enter graduate school and launch careers in STEM fields.

These Cal Poly Pomona students, many from modest means and the first in their families to attend college, gain the confidence and technical skills critical for graduate school and their careers by participating in programs Alas oversees.

"He's a champion for our students," says Associate Provost **Sep Eskandari**. "He channels all his creativity and energy for students."

The California State University recently presented Alas with the **Faculty Innovation and Leadership Award** and a \$5,000 prize. The biological science department also received \$10,000 for professional activities.

"I stand on the shoulders of 50 people across my lifetime," says Alas ('94, biology). "What I think of is all the people from my mentor to my mom. This is all of our award."

Alas, in his 15th year teaching at Cal Poly Pomona, is director of **Science Educational Enhancement Services (SEES)**, which serves historically low socioeconomic, underrepresented minority students in the College of Science. SEES provides mentoring, paid research fellowships, a First Year Experience course and workshops to assist students enrolled in advanced courses. Students also find a supportive peer community.

Chemistry Professor **Paul Hiemenz** established SEES in 1987. As a Cal Poly Pomona student and SEES participant in the 1990s, Alas found camaraderie among fellow students who assisted each other in their academic journeys and offered guidance as he entered UCLA's graduate program.

In Hiemenz, Alas found a professor, a mentor and a father figure.

"Dr. Paul Hiemenz took us all under his wings," he says. "I would not be here today without him."

Alas says he could never repay Hiemenz for all he did, but leading and growing the program that his professor founded is a way of honoring him.

After earning his doctoral degree at UCLA, Alas conducted research at the City of Hope but wanted to teach in the CSU. His dream came true when he joined the Cal Poly Pomona faculty. In 2013 he was named SEES director.

Alas also oversees the university's **Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation** and was instrumental in establishing **Discovery Camps**, a summer program offering tracks in computer and app programming, robotics, science, entrepreneurship and horse riding.

His research grants and fellowships include the NSF Biological Training in Education and Research Scholar program, as well as the five-year, \$1 million NSF Scholars Program in Research, Education and Science. He is the 2018-19 recipient of the Provost's Award for Excellence in Service at Cal Poly Pomona.

Alas says he loves his alma mater and its students.

"This isn't my job, this is my home," he says. "When I walk around campus, I see myself in the students."

**Support the Science Educational Enhancement Services program**

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