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Harvard Program Grooms Future Latino Leaders

UC Merced Latino Leadership Initiative participants already planning their future impact on the San Joaquin Valley

MERCED, Calif. — Five University of California, Merced, undergraduate students have been selected to attend the Latino Leadership Initiative (LLI) Program at Harvard University Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership, now in its third year.

The program, which was developed to address the rapid growth of the Latino population and the lack of Latino leadership representation across all sectors of society, starts June 23 in Cambridge, Mass., and lasts one week.

Students representing UC Merced this year include:

- Rubi Almanza, a junior from Planada majoring in mathematics;
- Baltazar Cornejo, a junior from Modesto majoring in political science;
- Adriana Lopez, a junior from Bakersfield majoring in biological sciences;
- Stephanie Toledo, a junior from La Mirada majoring in sociology; and
- Yolanda Villanueva, a junior from Wasco majoring in literatures and cultures.

According to the Center for Public Leadership, 70 percent of this year's participants are first-generation college students, which correlates with UC Merced's mission to increase chronically low levels of educational attainment in the Central Valley.

Quick Facts

- Harvard University Kennedy School's Latino Leadership Initiative has selected five UC Merced students to represent its third class.
- In total, 41 participants from eight universities from across the country were selected for the distinguished leadership program.
- The weeklong initiative begins June 23 and aims to prepare the next generation of Latino leaders.

“One of UC Merced's goals is to change the landscape for young people who never before thought they'd have the opportunity to attend a UC — let alone Harvard for a week,” said Jane Lawrence, vice chancellor for Student Affairs. “This experience is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for these talented students who were selected among hundreds of their peers and will no doubt transform the way they think, feel and lead.”

Stephanie Toledo hopes her experience in the program will help in her planned career as a social worker, and be a positive role model for her 6-year-old brother, Andrew, who she has helped raise since birth while her mother worked up to three jobs and her father was stricken with Parkinson's disease.

“At the Latino Leadership Initiative, I will be exposed to the wisdom of accomplished Latino leaders for the first time and this will be my greatest reward,” Toledo said. “I am ready to look beyond myself for guidance.”

Baltazar Cornejo, who began working alongside his father in the fields at age 15 to help ease his family's financial situation, is eager to return from the program with new knowledge, expanded contacts and refined leadership skills that will enable him to make an impact in the Central Valley and beyond.

“The Latino youth in the Central Valley of California face many challenges that must be dealt with to help them climb out of poverty and distress,” he said. “As a leader, I envision myself inspiring and helping the youth who don't see any way to succeed. Attending the Latino Leadership Initiative program will help me by teaching me the skills necessary to adapt and implement the leadership skills I learned at home, and apply them to a greater audience.”

The LLI curriculum will focus on public narrative, community organizing, negotiation, moral leadership, innovation, arts and activism, and public speaking. Participants will also have opportunities to build relationships with Latino leaders from the government, nonprofit and business sectors.

This year's faculty includes Andy Zelleke of Harvard Business School, Marshall Ganz of Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Divinity School Professor David Carrasco. Among the guest speakers will be Dr. Robert Sackstein, a Harvard Medical School professor who specializes in bone marrow transplants and stem cell research; Gustavo Arnavat, executive director of the Inter-American Development Bank; and Laura Nieto, senior manager of community affairs and grassroots at Southwest Airlines.

Twelve UC Merced students have participated in the program since its inception in 2010 and they are already making an impact on the campus and the community.

Noel “Justin” Gomez and Patricia Paredes — members of the 2011 LLI class — initiated the Merced County Project 10%, a collaboration with prosecutors, educators and community leaders aimed to increase high school graduation rates in Merced County by 10 percent over the next five years.

“We are honored to again welcome UC Merced students into our Latino Leadership Initiative Program and look forward to working with this new cohort on building the momentum that was created from last year’s community action project group entitled Merced County Project 10%,” Collado said. “Our Harvard LLI Program looks to continue to build leadership capability within the San Joaquin Valley for years to come.”

LLI has teamed up with eight universities across the country including UC Merced, Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles), Texas A&M International University, the University of Houston, the University of Massachusetts-Boston, the University of Texas-Pan American; Miami Dade College, and, for the first time, the City University of New York’s Macaulay Honors College.

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UC Merced opened Sept. 5, 2005, as the 10th campus in the University of California system and the first American research university of the 21st century. The campus significantly expands access to the UC system for students throughout the state, with a special mission to increase college-going rates among students in the San Joaquin Valley. It also serves as a major base of advanced research and as a stimulus to economic growth and diversification throughout the region. Situated near Yosemite National Park, the university is expected to grow rapidly, topping out at about 25,000 students within 30 years.