

STUDENT STORIES

Angelica Esquivel, on Building a Network Through Organizing

As a high school student, CLP Executive Committee Member Angelica Esquivel didn't think college was for her. Sure, it seemed prohibitively expensive. But mostly she figured the challenges to obtaining higher education as an undocumented student were insurmountable.



"I wasn't really ready," Angelica admitted. "I never thought I would go to college because of my status so I hadn't really prepared myself mentally to go."

Her senior year of high school, however, that all changed when an outreach coordinator from DeAnza College came to speak with students and do placement testing. "My cousin and I went and asked him: 'Can we take the placement test and go to DeAnza if we're undocumented?'"

When answer came back an unequivocal "yes," Angelica wasted no more time in pursuing her education. "I started at DeAnza in 2009 and right away I joined the student club for undocumented students, called I.M.A.S.S., that was just getting started," she said, using the group's acronym, which stands for Integral Movement for AB 540 Student Success. "That's where my activism started," Angelica said.

Through I.M.A.S.S., she learned about the Vasconcellos Institute for Democracy In Action (VIDA), which in turn introduced her to Cynthia Kaufman, VIDA's director. Cynthia informed her of the Certificate in Leadership and Social Change (LSC) program, which was just starting up in the fall of 2011. After joining the LSC program and becoming an intern

with VIDA she worked on institutionalizing a resource center at De Anza Community College. The resource center is called Higher Education for AB 540 Students (HEFAS) and has been serving undocumented and low-income students for the past 5 years.

“When I read more about the LSC program and the classes, I thought: ‘This is perfect! I don’t have to take random classes to learn more about civic engagement, I can take the classes for the Certificate.’”

By the time Angelica enrolled in the LSC program, it was her fourth year on campus. “I was already really active in movements on and off campus, mostly around immigration,” she said. But being part of the LSC cohort helped her connect more with students who were similarly active and passionate, but on a whole array of community issues.

“It broadened my thinking about movements and how issues are connected,” she said. Angelica said she benefitted most from being part of a close-knit cohort of students, whom she studied and worked with through the LSC coursework. “Students were there because they chose to be there,” she said of her cohort. “It’s not just a random group taking the class because it fit their schedule. Everyone was involved in social justice because the issue affected them or someone they know.”



Her cohort didn’t always agree ideologically or politically, Angelica pointed out. “But having a consistent group to work with created a safe space where we can be open,” she elaborated. “And you need that safe space because a lot of social justice is about being vulnerable. We don’t all have to agree but we have to be willing to hear and respect what other people have to say. For me, having that space to share about my life and experiences and learn about other’s was really important.”

Angelica also appreciated how the LSC classes relied upon the lived experiences of the students in the classroom. “Usually, it’s the other way around,” she said. “You take what you learn in the classroom, and then apply it in your life.” In the LSC classes, she said, “I brought to the class what I had from my experiences on the streets. That’s the whole message of LSC—Come here with your experiences. Your experiences are important.”

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Angelica’s first job after obtaining her four-year degree was with a social justice nonprofit called Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action (TIGRA). Even though she was new to the professional nonprofit world, she felt her classwork through the LSC program gave her a leg up in her new position.

“Thanks to LSC, I had the vocabulary and concepts I needed to understand the ideas and strategies we were using,” she said. “When you come from DeAnza, and especially with the full-on training we get through the LSC, you come out and lead with a certain kind of experience. A lot of people running nonprofits have been there for more than 20 years and yet they never received that kind of training.”

Angelica then worked at San Mateo Adult School as a college and career counselor. Here, too, she found opportunity to apply what she’d learned through LSC to her community change work and professional life. For me, having a Certificate in Leadership and Social Change at the college level is really important,” Angelica said. “When I interviewed for the jobs I’ve had at TIGRA and the school district, they would point to the Certificate on my resume and ask me: ‘So what is this Certificate about? What did they teach you and what kinds of skills did you learn?’ I’m always very proud

to list the Certificate on my resume and explain what it is—that I have these extra skills and knowledge.”

Angelica also attributes the LSC program for helping develop a useful network. “In the LSC, we had to do community service hours every quarter,” she said. “That was great. Cynthia would bring nonprofits with different volunteer opportunities to meet with us, and that’s how I met TIGRA. “

Her time in LSC also provided her with a surprising source of comfort, given the current political environment. Angelica says she, like many around the country, is concerned about the potential reversal of the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program, which allows children of undocumented individuals to work and study legally in the country. But the LSC program, she says, helped her to build the confidence to face whatever the future has in store.

“Of course I want DACA to continue,” she said. “But I lived before DACA and I can live after DACA. If it doesn’t survive, I know I’ll face obstacles. But I also know that I’ll still have possibilities.” If DACA is repealed, for instance, she and some friends from LSC have considered starting their own nonprofit. “Nonprofits can have private funding,” she said. “We can still be entrepreneurs even without DACA.”

“I feel very confident that there will always be a space and place in the community organizing and social justice world for me to work and volunteer in,” she continued. “I see myself doing this work for a very, very long time.”

Angelica is now back at De Anza College as the Program Coordinator for VIDA. She says she is honored to work with the program that gave her the tools to become a change agent in the community and pass the knowledge to current and future LSC participants. She is also the Director of HEFAS, the program she co-founded, which is now part of VIDA.

Profile by David Dodge