

STUDENT STORIES OF NAVIGATING THE MAZE

NANCY



“I really won’t give up, and the second thing is just knowing that I’m also not alone, and knowing that there’s resources out there that are able to help me.”

—NANCY

Nancy is a Mexican American, first-generation, low-income college student studying neuroscience. She aspires to pursue a career in medicine. Nancy was raised in Brighton Park and describes herself as introverted and resilient. She hopes to help other students in situations similar to her own someday.

CHOOSING A COLLEGE DURING HIGH SCHOOL

As a first-generation college student, Nancy described feeling like it was largely her responsibility to understand the college admissions process. To seek extra help, she applied to a college access and success program geared towards under-resourced students seeking one-on-one college counseling and preparation. After she was accepted, this program provided Nancy with support outside of school to help her navigate the college application process. By the end of her senior year, she received multiple college acceptance letters and decided to attend a private four-year college.

CHALLENGES AT HER FIRST COLLEGE

Even though Nancy excelled academically in high school, she had a challenging first year of college both socially and academically. Nancy was a commuter student, and so she struggled to find a sense of community at a college where so many students lived on campus. “I kind of felt pretty much alone, and that kind of took a toll on me as the school year progressed,” she said. “Because I also had to work, I couldn’t really do any activities that I wanted to do there.”

She explained that she worked more hours than she would have liked during her first year of college because she wanted to avoid taking out loans to pay her tuition. However, working so many hours also meant she had less time to take advantage of her college’s academic supports: “They did have some events for commuters like myself, but... [I had to] go straight to work after school... so I couldn’t really attend those.”

TRANSFERRING TO A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

Nancy hadn’t seriously considered attending a two-year college. “[My high school] kind of expected us to end up going to these big universities, and they didn’t really expect us to end up going to community college,” she explained.

Even so, by the end of her first year of college, Nancy decided to transfer to a local two-year college where she would receive more financial aid and be able to take advantage of

her college's academic supports: "They did have some events for commuters like myself, but... [I had to] go straight to work after school... so I couldn't really attend those."

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Even so, by the end of her first year of college, Nancy decided to transfer to a local two-year college where she would receive more financial aid and be able to take advantage of on-campus academic supports, such as one-on-one office hours with her professors. She planned to eventually transfer back to a different four-year college once she completed her associate degree.

Nancy described feeling frustrated by the process of transferring from a four-year college to a two-year college. She was surprised to learn that some of her credits would only count as elective credit at her new two-year college.

Although Nancy didn't feel particularly supported by her four-year college during the transfer process, she developed a strong relationship with her academic advisors at her two-year college by reaching out often and consistently whenever she had questions. She explained that this helped her stay on track for her associate degree despite some of her original credits only counting as elective credits.

"They consistently asked me what colleges I'm looking to transfer to and [made] sure ... I'm taking the adequate classes for [transferring to a four-year]," she explained. "They also helped me with making sure I was on track for [my associate degree], and then they consistently connected me to resources that they found would be relevant to me." Although Nancy had described how adjusting to her new campus environment seemed challenging at first, she noted that her academic counselors ultimately helped her transition with relative ease.

Nancy also found a stronger sense of community at her two-year college. "[Many students] lived in the same area, have the same back story, and... that was really comforting to have," she noted.

In addition, Nancy no longer had the same pressure to work to afford her post-secondary education: she received a full-ride institutional scholarship. Nancy noted that this scholarship freed her from working the same amount of hours that she did her first year of college, and she excelled academically during her second year.

TRANSFERRING BACK TO A DIFFERENT FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE

In the spring of her second year, Nancy was connected to a transition coach at a public four-year college through a promotional email. The coach helped her learn about a program they offered to support Latinx students interested in STEM. Nancy attributed her positive

experiences at her current four-year college to this program as well as her transition coach, who introduced her to mentoring programs and internship opportunities.

Nancy is optimistic that going into her fourth year of college, she will continue thriving academically. She also wants to give back to the communities that supported her: she will be a mentor for younger students in her college's Latinx STEM program, and she is advocating for college access and success programs to increase their support for transfer students.

WHAT WORKED FOR NANCY

- 1. *Financial aid that covered the cost of tuition.*** Ultimately, Nancy benefitted from attending colleges that did not require her to work in order to afford tuition. She used her free time to take advantage of academic supports like tutoring and office hours, which helped her excel academically after a challenging first year of college.
- 2. *Finding counselors at the colleges she wanted to attend to help her with the transfer process.*** At first, Nancy found herself struggling with transferring credits from her original four-year college to her two-year college. However, once she connected with academic advisors at her two-year college, they helped her figure out how she could stay on track for her degree.

In addition, opening a promotional email from a four-year college and reaching out to the contact listed in the email helped her connect with a transition coach who not only helped her transfer but also helped her find community and internship opportunities on campus.

- 3. *Finding community among students and advisors with similar backgrounds.*** At Nancy's current university, joining a Latinx STEM program played an important role in helping her figure out her professional journey after college. The program provided her with opportunities to receive academic and professional support as well as develop a network of supportive peers.