

MUTUAL INSPIRATION



Lecturer Mark Montoya advocates for first generation students.

As the first person in his family to go to college, T. Mark Montoya—an Ethnic Studies lecturer at Northern Arizona University as well as an alumnus—knows the challenges of navigating university life.

His passion is guiding these types of students to success.

“Doing the work I do with first generation students like myself, I want them to really understand that they’re not alone,” he says. “It’s very personal for me.”

Montoya’s efforts to support those students earned him an Outstanding Advocate Award from the university. In addition, he has been the keynote faculty speaker at new student orientation for three years running. His goal is to give new students—and their parents—insight into higher education. And he also serves as a resource if they need guidance.

“I want them to really understand that they’re not alone,” he says. “They still have to ask for help, they still have to ask questions. If I’m not the person who can answer the question, I can at least be the person who can find somebody who can answer that question.”

Coming in first

Montoya's message is an important one at NAU: almost 50 percent of the students at the university are the first in their families to go to college. At freshman orientation, where students and their families take time to explore the campus and begin the transition into college life, he serves as living proof that first-generation students can accomplish their dreams.

“I want to let them know that there’s at least one person who—while seemingly might have it together—still asks for help and is still part of this process as well,” he says. “One of the things I also say is that I’ve been asked to do this talk to inspire you, but I don’t need to inspire you. It is people like you who are inspiring me every day.”

Building connections

Montoya also draws inspiration from other campus work. He serves as a faculty advisor for several multicultural groups and teaches Ethnic Studies courses. And he works for the Successful Transition and Academic Readiness (STAR) program, which brings incoming freshman to the university the summer before their first semester and allows them to experience college classes—and life—while being supported by professors and staff. Despite the variety of activities he’s engaged in, Montoya says all of his endeavors are all part of “one big project” to give students the chance to thrive.

“My favorite part of being a teacher is seeing people succeed, seeing them graduate, and getting e-mails or a Facebook message from a student who personally thanks me for something,” Montoya says. “It’s those little things that I think matter and it’s those personal connections that really make a big difference.”