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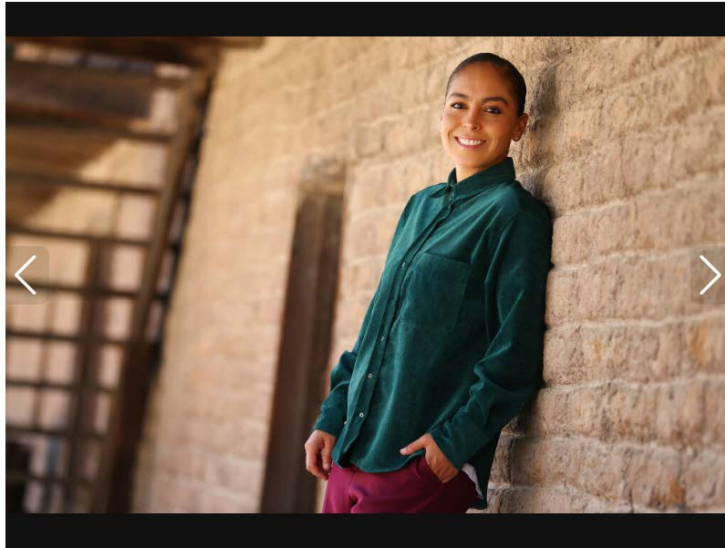
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University of San Francisco Associate Professor Dr. Daniela Dominguez coordinates a unique program that provides full-ride scholarships to bilingual/bicultural mental health professionals who are becoming marriage and family therapists. Photo taken in Sonoma on Friday, Aug. 4, 2023. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat)

MARTIN ESPINOZA
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Nallely Ramirez always planned to return to Sonoma County and give back to her community, even as her horizons grew wider with every sociology class she took at UC Santa Cruz.

Once she returned, the 30-year-old Healdsburg native became immersed in the turmoil and trauma of people in her community during a period of perennial fires.

Working for organizations like YWCA, Legal Aid and Corazon Healdsburg, Ramirez quickly saw the quiet mental-health suffering of many Spanish-speaking residents, especially in north Sonoma County.

Just before the pandemic hit, she started thinking about going to grad school and becoming a therapist, but that would mean taking on a lot more debt.

"It is a limitation, it's a barrier, it's something that keeps people who want to be doing this work from doing it because of the cost," Ramirez said. "A lot of us have so much debt from undergrad that going into a master's program is almost impossible."

Then she learned about the Mental Health Talent Pipeline, a unique education program that provides full-tuition scholarships to bilingual and bicultural students seeking a master's degree in counseling psychology.

The pipeline, a partnership between Healthcare Foundation Northern Sonoma County and the Santa Rosa

campus of the University of San Francisco, allowed her to focus on the needs of her community without worrying about the cost of her education.

"That's something that a lot of folks have issues with, and that's why the mental health pipeline is so important," Ramirez said. "They don't have to think about that. We're able to continue working in community-based agencies, we're able to provide these services for free."

Created in 2019, the pipeline is an effort to seed a new generation of aspiring young professionals who can help fill a much-needed mental health gap in the local Latino community. The pipeline has produced 12 students who have completed the three-year program and are now providing bilingual, bicultural mental health services around the county, said Kimberly Bender, executive director of the Healthcare Foundation.

Bender said another six students — three just completed their first year and three their second year — are working on their degrees. The foundation has funding to pay tuition for nine more students, three each year for the next three years starting in the fall of 2023.

"It's a lot of money," Bender said, adding that tuition funds per student for three years of study are about \$76,500.

The foundation pays for \$55,463 of that, and USF provides the rest, so tuition is 100% covered for the students, she said. The third year of study for a master's program in counseling psychology is a "traineeship year" that in many cases would go unpaid, Bender said.

The foundation is poised to launch a related program that will actually pay students in training for the work they do. The bilingual/bicultural clinical training program will also offer online curriculum taught in Spanish in partnership with On the Margins, a San Francisco-based organization that provides counseling, coaching, consulting, education, and youth development services.

Earlier this month, the Healthcare Foundation announced that it had received a grant of \$275,000 from Kaiser Permanente to support the launch of its Bicultural Clinical Training Program. Additionally, a grant of \$44,000 from the Peter E. Haas Jr. Family Fund will help support the program's online curriculum.

Dr. Daniela Dominguez, the founder of On the Margins and a USF instructor, was part of the initial conversations between the foundation and the university. At the time, Debbie Mason, former executive director of the foundation, reached out to her in hopes of creating and funding a traineeship program that would benefit northern Sonoma County residents.

The program initially consisted of an \$8,500 stipend for third-year students, but it quickly became apparent that the best way to keep young mental health professionals in Sonoma County was to relieve the tremendous burden of tuition and focus on homegrown talent like Ramirez with roots in local communities.

"Historically, our bilingual, bicultural students are working full time while they're going to school," Dominguez said. "I was hearing in the classroom, just a lot of concern around the uncertainty, concerns around the salaries that mental health clinicians are getting paid in the area and whether they would be able to afford paying for housing and their loans."

Dominguez, who is also coordinator of USF's marriage and family therapy program in Santa Rosa, said she doesn't know of any other master's level full-time scholarships for counseling psychology students in California.

The prospect of landing the full-ride scholarship has also generated a lot of interest in USF's Santa Rosa program.

"Six years ago, we had 15 students in the class, and we had one Latinx student," she said. "This year's cohort has 30 students, so we've doubled enrollment and I would say now about half of the classroom, if not the majority, of the student body is Latinx-identifying."

Juan Torres, the executive director of Santa Rosa-based Humanitas Therapy and Education Services, which offers trainee opportunities for pipeline students, said the program gives mental health students — many of them first-generation college students or first-generation immigrants — opportunities of mentorship and financial support common among more privileged students.

He said that for many first-generation parents, the thought of seeing their kids go back to school for an expensive master's degree with 3,000 practicum hours of unpaid work is hard to stomach. Parents will say, "we came here to work and these kids all they want to do is go to school," Torres said in Spanish.

But it's a cultural hurdle that must be cleared, he said, because the need is tremendous. Though Latino

residents are nearing a third of the county's population, the local health care system is struggling to hire enough bilingual and bicultural therapists.

Torres said one local community health center reported to him that "if they get lucky" one out of 10 applicants for a therapist position will be bilingual. And not all who say bilingual are actually proficient

Humanidad is the foundation's partner organization in the new Bicultural Clinical Training Program, which currently has enough funding for two trainees. Humanidad will employ two new trainees in Cloverdale, providing salary and benefits, supervision in Spanish and additional education.

That level of support is rare, said Bender.

"Many organizations take on trainees, very few take them on as employees, and almost none provide benefits," he said.

A quick review of the current pipeline participants [listed on the Healthcare Foundation's website](#) yields a variety of backgrounds and experience:

Jennifer Oseguera Chavez, who grew up in Cotati and Rohnert Park, earned a double major in Spanish and Psychology from UC Davis and returned to Sonoma County to pursue a career in mental health. Oseguera, who was raised by a single mom, said a desire to confront mental health taboos in Mexican culture fueled her focus on psychology and her hope to become an advocate for mental health in her community.

Stephanie Sosa, who came to the United States from Mexico when she was 5 and grew up in Petaluma, said she didn't realize mental health was "a thing" until she started studying at Sonoma State. In her bio, Sosa stated "It just seemed so important, because once I brought the subject of mental health to my parents, we started talking about what mental health looked like in our family. And how that could be changed."

The pipeline program, which is funded through 2026, relies on donations and community gifts, Bender said. The Healthcare Foundation is currently raising money to help with the full tuition program, as well as the bilingual/bicultural training program.

To learn more about the Mental Health Talent Training Pipeline, visit the Healthcare Foundation's website: <https://healthcarefoundation.net/projects/mental-health-talent-pipeline-project/>

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