

Nine and a half hours from mi pequeño hometown, I stood in the middle of Texas Tech University's First-Gen Fiesta, surrounded by the familiar sight of mangonadas, the rhythm of corridos, and the warmth of a comunidad that felt like familia. This event was a testament to how a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) nurtures its students. The First-Gen Fiesta reminded me of the "We the People" spirit—una comunidad where everyone, no matter their background, came together to celebrate our shared heritage and support each other's journeys. For a first-generation Latino student like me, who initially felt worlds away from home, the Fiesta was more than a celebration—it was a lifeline. I'll never forget standing there, eating my mangonada, listening to the corridos, and watching everyone interact laughing, dancing, and sharing stories. It was incredible, a moment that made me feel truly at home. Watching everyone at the Fiesta—unafraid to be themselves, speaking Spanglish, and sharing their stories—made me feel accepted for who I am, a first-gen Latino student with big dreams. The Fiesta introduced me to a network of support that would shape my college journey and help me embrace mi identidad in ways I never thought possible.

As a member of both the First-Gen and HSI communities at Texas Tech, I had the privilege of attending Hispanic and Latino higher education conferences, like the annual Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) conference. These experiences were transformative. I vividly remember sitting in a workshop, listening to a panel of Latino professionals share their stories of breaking barriers in STEM. Their words resonated deeply with me, a young man who often felt out of place in my predominantly non-Hispanic nutrition classes. These conferences allowed me to explore mi herencia through cultural performances, like dancing, and connect with otros who shared my background—students who, like me, were navigating the complexities of being first-gen while striving to excel academically. Attending HACU filled me con orgullo, knowing that I was part of a legacy of Latinos breaking barriers in higher education. I found a sense of belonging in these spaces, a reminder that I wasn't solo in my journey to understand my identity while pursuing my dreams.

Academically, the road wasn't always easy. As a nutrition major with aspirations to become a pharmacist, I often found myself in challenging environments. My classes were predominantly female and non-Hispanic, and I sometimes felt the pressure of being one of the few Latino students in the room. There were moments of self-doubt when I questioned whether I truly belonged in these spaces. But the mentorship I received from the First-Gen and HSI staff at Texas Tech became my anchor. I'll never forget the day I sat down with my HSI director, who shared his own story of being a first-generation student. He encouraged me to see my unique perspective as a strength, not a barrier. My HSI director's encouragement showed me that I was accepted in this field, that my voice as a Latino

student mattered. With his guidance, I gained the confianza to speak up in class, to ask questions, and to believe that my presence in the field of nutrition and pharmacy mattered. The HSI staff also connected me with resources like scholarships and study groups tailored for Hispanic students, ensuring I had the tools to succeed. This led to my award of the Raider Rojos Scholarship which highlighted my perseverance as a first-gen Latino student and showed how I could lead and support other first-gen Latinos like me, building a stronger comunidad together.

Beyond academics, Texas Tech's HSI community helped me cultivate lasting amistades and a sense of purpose. As a lead mentor in the First-Gen department, I had the opportunity to guide other first-gen students, muchos of whom were Hispanic like me. I organized events like resume workshops and study nights, but the most rewarding moments were the pláticas we shared—stories of balancing cultural expectations with academic pressures, of being the first in our families to attend college, and of the orgullo we felt in carrying our heritage forward. Through my role as a lead mentor, I discovered the power of my voice—el poder to inspire other first-gen Hispanic students to believe in themselves, just as I had learned to do. These friendships became mi familia away from home, a support system that reminded me of the tight-knit community I left behind. The HSI and First-Gen staff were equally instrumental, offering not just guidance but also a listening ear. They celebrated my successes, like when I spoke at AHSIE A conference for the converging of HIS faculty and schools my mentor and former director stood by me to literally cheer me on, and they supported me through challenges, like when I struggled to balance my coursework with my role as a mentor. Through these relationships, I honed my leadership skills and discovered a deep sense of purpose in serving mi comunidad.

My experiences at Texas Tech have shaped my future goals in profound ways. I dream of opening my own pharmacy one day, with a focus on advocating for the health of all Americans, especially Hispanics and Latinos, who are disproportionately affected by health issues like diabetes and hypertension. My background in nutrition has given me a unique perspective on the role of education in addressing these disparities. Texas Tech's HSI community gave me el poder to dream of opening my own pharmacy, where I can advocate for the health of mi gente and show young Latinos that they have the power to succeed in STEM. I want to empower mi gente with knowledge—whether it's teaching families about healthy eating habits or encouraging young Hispanic students to pursue higher education and STEM degrees. Just as I hope to pass down opportunities to the next generation, Texas Tech's HSI helped me transition from an uncertain high school graduate to a confident college student, ready to make a difference. As a first-generation student, I draw inspiration from the opportunities I've had at Texas Tech, from attending conferences

to connecting with diverse mentees. I hope to bring that same inspiration back to my peers and future generations, showing them that they, too, can achieve their sueños.

Texas Tech's status as an HSI provided me with the foundation I needed to thrive—academically, culturally, and as a leader. The sense of belonging I found at the First-Gen Fiesta, the mentorship that guided me through challenges, and the friendships that became mi familia all remind me of the power of community. Texas Tech taught me the meaning of “We the People”—a community that lifts each other up, empowering us to chase our dreams while staying rooted in our cultura. Now, as I pursue my goal of becoming a pharmacist, I carry these lessons conmigo. I hope to give back by ensuring that other first-gen and Hispanic students have the same opportunities, mentorship, and support that helped me succeed. I carry the orgullo of my culture with me, inspired by Texas Tech to give back to mi comunidad and ensure others feel the same pride I do. Texas Tech didn't just give me an education—it gave me un hogar, a purpose, y el coraje to dream bigger than I ever thought possible.