

Thumbs Up Guys Scholarship Essay

As a first-generation student, my transition from high school to college was difficult. I was embarrassed to share that I was a first-generation college student and avoided events designed for students like me. I felt alone as if I did not belong in a college environment. Classes a typical student might find reasonably challenging presented me with significant difficulty as I had the additional responsibility of maintaining a part-time federal work-study job.

Because of my adverse experience, I sought to empower other first-generation students. As an intern for Student Action Farmworkers, I mentored children of farmworkers from rural North Carolina throughout the college application process. I was vulnerable with my students and shared that I, too, had doubted whether I could attend an institution of higher education. I encouraged my mentees to apply to college and assisted them in crafting application essays that conveyed their perseverance despite the economic hardships they faced. Whenever they became disheartened, I reminded them they would be an asset to any university. I urged them to learn from my experience and join a first-generation student affinity group that informed them about the academic and professional resources available to them.

Additionally, I wanted my students to enter their first year of college proud of their first-generation background instead of ashamed like I was. To assist them in gaining confidence in sharing their stories, I supported my students in advocating for humane working conditions for their parents and other farmworkers. I reminded them that even though it was intimidating to speak out against the injustices they faced, their voices deserved to be heard. I connected the teens with a local filmmaker to develop a bilingual video project called [“Voices from the Field.”](#) a series that used an engaging format to raise awareness about occupational and mental health

Alyson Diaz

issues. This project allowed my students to speak out against the inhumane working conditions their parents experienced while proposing tangible ways to combat serious health risks such as heat exhaustion and pesticide poisoning. Rehearsing and drafting the video series empowered the youth to use their voices to advocate for issues that affected their daily lives. My students were propelling the fight for justice for farmworkers and inspiring others to speak out.

Today, I keep in contact with my students and I'm overwhelmed when they share the impact I have had on their lives. Currently, all of my students are enrolled in a college or university. Perhaps they would not have viewed attending college as an attainable goal without my mentorship. My guidance instilled in them the courage to apply and succeed in college. One of my students has decided to meet the critical need in her community for medical professionals by pursuing a career in dentistry. Three of my students started their own first-generation college student affinity group at their respective universities, where they continued to create a community of peers that supports one another.

Furthermore, the "Voices from the Field" project that I helped my students to complete has instilled in them a commitment to serve their community and advocate for improving the working conditions of farmworkers at the North Carolina General Assembly. During these assembly meetings, my students shared testimony of the lack of water, restrooms, and shade from the sun on North Carolina fields. They also described how employers prey on farmworkers' fear of losing their jobs and adverse actions by law enforcement and immigration officials. Our advocacy has led to tangible policy changes such as the adequate enforcement of restrooms and drinking water to be within one mile of the field.

Alyson Diaz

My experience at Student Action Farmworkers and the transformation both my students and I underwent have inculcated in me the value of mentorship. Helping farmworker youth embrace their backgrounds and encouraging them to become civically engaged professionals has shown me that volunteering can genuinely change someone's life. As a law student, I will continue to inspire other first-generation undergraduates to apply to law school and advise them throughout the application process. Offering first-generation students mentorship opportunities before they arrive at an institution of higher education will allow them to view the profession as an achievable dream; thus, increasing the diversity of perspectives in the field. By taking the time to help other students navigate the law school application process, I will show them that there is always someone that believes in their ability to reach their goals.