

Empowering Parents, Too

Ken Simons, director of UCR's African Student Programs, says the goal is not only to empower first-generation students, but also their parents. Through campus tours and discussions, leaders provide them with a familiarity with the university and a vocabulary to help them guide their children throughout their four years in college.

He explains, "Parents who have not gone through this process might not know how to ask their children the right questions — questions such as: 'Have you been to office hours? Does your professor know you by your first name? Have you built up letters of recommendation? Have you gotten involved in campus resources?' We let them know that we're here to serve as a surrogate and to fill in the blanks, and

let them know that we have their son or daughter's back."

All the efforts seem to be paying off. In 2010, the Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based educational research organization, hailed UCR as a model for educating African American and Latino students. Both student populations traditionally consist of high percentages of first-generation students. A study

Where the Road Forked UCR professors who were

"Good people on the way ... helped me."



Michael Orosco assistant professor of bilingual education

Growing up in Colorado, Orosco's family lived in a very blue-collar environment where the sole focus of existence was making ends meet. "People in my neighborhood weren't thinking or talking about college. They didn't see it as an option," he said. Orosco's father was illiterate — "I had to sign his paycheck for him," he said — but he knew school was important for his children.

One day, his dad took him over to the railroad where he had a job working on the tracks. His dad told Michael, "I don't want you working out here because I want you to go to college."

Orosco pursued that dream not knowing how hard it would be — "not just academically but socially," he said. Mentors were

his lifesavers. "I had some good people on the way who helped me. Role models to show me how to tie a tie, to tell me things like you have to wear dress shoes to an interview, not athletic shoes. ... I got my teaching degree because [that became my goal] — I wanted to help students."

Of the five Orosco siblings, four graduated from college. When they first graduated, his parents were proud but a bit in shock. Orosco's first job was as a teacher: "My father thought I was the janitor. He was really happy because I got to work inside, not doing physical labor out in the open." Even today, Orosco's mother can't comprehend that he gets paid to sit in an office and write. Orosco said, "Nobody in our old neighborhood did that!"



Eamonn Keogh professor of computer science and engineering

Born and raised in Ireland, Keogh was the youngest of nine. His father worked in the Guinness factory, so they lived in a Guinness house. "I was a bad student. On my street, no one had a good job or had an education. The men were tradesmen and women worked in a shop until they got married." Keogh left school at 15 to be a car painter. "I hated it," he said. While visiting a sister in California, he was encouraged to go to college by his sister's in-laws. "It had never occurred to me as I had no siblings that went to college or even finished high school."

Keogh was 19 when he enrolled at the Mira Costa Community College in Oceans-

ide. At Cal State San Marcos, a professor named Rika Yoshii inspired Keogh to get his Ph.D. He credits community colleges with making it easy for him to work and study. "You get the message that you can do anything and I pass it on to my students. ... It's what you can do that matters."

Keogh often goes home to Ireland. "Four of the five other guys who started car painting with me are still there — in the same job, same overalls, same jokes, same cigarettes. While they seem happy enough I can't imagine having that life. In contrast, I have been all over the world, met incredibly interesting people, done things, talked to experts. ... I'm not smarter than they are, it was just luck and a willingness to leave the country, combined with the easier path to third-level education that America provides."