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Finding his own niche

The challenges began when Sergio Pelayo started Kindergarten in Eugene.

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He spoke Spanish at home and was the only Latino student in his class.

Turns out, learning English was the easy part.

Finding his niche between cultures — that of his family and that of his

classmates — took a lot more work.

On a path to success

By middle school Sergio's academic talents blossomed. He was making honor rolls, taking advanced classes and talking his way into the toughest class work he could find.

His success continued into high school. He found connections playing trumpet in a mariachi band and by being active in student organizations like Latinos Unidos and the National Honors Society.

Most recently, the 2012 Willamette High School graduate earned a [Diversity Excellence Scholarship](http://financialaid.uoregon.edu/diversity_excellence_scholarship) from the University of Oregon, where he's a member of this year's incoming class.

A family affair

"My mom was always pushing me," Sergio says. "At first she wasn't used to the American grading system of A's, B's and C's. But she always wants A's. She's always trying to get me to do more."

[2012 Incoming Class](http://uonews.uoregon.edu/archive/news-release/2012/9/uo-attracts-top-class-freshmen-2012-academic-year-begins)

- The UO is welcoming about 5,500 new students this fall, including nearly 4,000 freshmen.
- The 2012 freshman class boasts an average GPA of between 3.57 and 3.58. (The 10-year average for freshman class GPA at the UO is 3.4.)
- Students of color account for more than 25 percent of this year's freshman class — topping the mark of 23 percent set a year ago.
- International enrollment for the freshman class will top 10 percent — the highest in UO history.
- All 50 states and nearly 100 countries will be represented by students on campus.



<http://champions.uoregon.edu/sites/champions-websites.uoregon.edu/files/Sergio922.jpg>

Sergio Pelayo credits his mother, Martha, with pushing him to succeed.

Sergio points to the involvement of his parents, his mother Martha (pictured with her son above) and father Sergio, as the key to his success. But for Martha, who immigrated to the U.S. more than two decades ago, learning to navigate the school system in the U.S. was challenging at first.

As Sergio approached his senior year at Willamette High School it only seemed natural that his next step would be college. But at a time when many students and parents tackle financial aid paperwork, college tours and tests like the ACT and SAT, things grew a little daunting.

Community connections

It was connections with the community — and UO outreach programs — that helped Sergio find his way into higher education. Sergio had studied on the UO campus during the summer between eighth and ninth grades as part of the UO's weeklong [Summer Academy to Inspire Learning \(SAIL\)](http://sail.uoregon.edu/).

"I got to come to campus and pretend to be a big kid," Sergio remembers. "It helped me imagine college."

A few years later, at a celebration for Mexican Independence Day, Sergio's band ended up playing a song while Antonio Huerta, the outreach manager for the University of Oregon's [Opportunities Program](http://opportunities.uoregon.edu/), performed as a charro, a traditional Mexican cowboy doing rope tricks. The two met again when Huerta went to Willamette High School to do a presentation for the Opportunities Program, a UO program for under-represented students and parents.

"Sergio is a special student," Huerta says. "I'd heard about him long before I met him. He's going to be a huge asset for our institution."

Coming full circle

As high school wound down, Sergio was focused on college. But he still had a couple questions about the formalities of the process. For answers, he turned to Jill Torres, then a UO graduate student who had long been active with several programs, including [Ganas](http://pages.uoregon.edu/mecha/?page_id=12), a middle school outreach program through the UO's [MEChA](http://pages.uoregon.edu/mecha/) group. Torres was also on the staff of the Opportunities Program.

She had even given Sergio's younger sister dance lessons. After talking with him at dance practices, Torres sensed his curiosity. She took him on a tour of campus, introducing him around and making sure he applied for the Diversity Excellence Scholarship.

"I give tours a lot to students I know," Torres says. "But it is really wonderful to see it come full circle and to know Sergio will be here."

Paving the way

Officially, Sergio is undecided in his major, but he is leaning toward a double major in [ethnic studies](http://ethnic.uoregon.edu/) and [political science](http://polisci.uoregon.edu/). He ultimately wants to be an immigration lawyer.

Starting at the UO will bring a new set of challenges. But Sergio's also issuing one his own to his younger siblings.

"I'm paving the path," he says. "They have to do as well as I have or better."

— [Zack Barnett](mailto:zbarnett@uoregon.edu)