

NAICU Pell Grant Speech by Michelle Vasquez

February 7, 2022

My name is Michelle Vasquez, and I am a proud Undergraduate student at Trinity Washington University. I was born and raised in Washington D.C. and am a proud graduate of D.C. Public Schools.

When I first heard the word “college” it wasn’t at a young age. Neither was it from my parents. One day, when I was a sophomore in the hallways of my high school a group of upperclassmen approached me and asked, “What college do you want to go to?” and I responded, “What’s college?”. What I received in return from them was not the definition of ‘college’. Instead, they laughed and made it seem like I should have known what college was. But more important, I received a solid piece of advice that stuck with me. They told me “your grades matter for you to get into college”. I was startled to learn that I could **continue** to go to school after I graduated from high school. A reality that seemed so far away that a future beyond it hadn’t even crossed my mind. I heeded the advice from those students who laughed at me & yet inspired me – I worked hard in H.S. resolved that I would be able to take the next step in my higher education.

I raised the idea of college with my family, and I am thankful to have received their full support and continuous prayers for me until this day. However, unresolved was how would I pay for college. Senior year, I began to apply to colleges, and I also applied to some scholarships. Actually, a lot of scholarships. In fact, a little over 130 scholarships – I was very motivated! I kept applying to scholarships since, unlike many, I had **no** college savings plan. I was inspired by the idea that I would be the **first** in my entire Latino family to go to college and I would be the main **role model** for my younger brother who would be next in this journey.

Since then, I understood why my mother would always tell me “Study hard, if you don’t, you’ll end up cleaning houses with me”. And not that there was anything wrong with that, but I knew that continuing to live on a low income, continuing to experience discrimination from our landlords, continuing to live in a dangerous neighborhood, and not affording many basic necessities, was not the ideal American Dream that my family had intended for me and my brother. I knew my family’s future depended on

me, and an education would equip me to address these disparities for myself and other families.

But you see, education in America is incredibly expensive, and a college degree is unattainable to most underprivileged, first-generation students. Since my parents were not in a position to help me at all financially, the financial burden would be entirely my own. Graduating with an enormous debt was absolutely terrifying. I however, was determined since I believed wholeheartedly that a rigorous education was the best gateway to **personal** and **intellectual** growth, and would provide me with effective tools to contribute in a larger scale to address the complex dilemmas that haunt our interconnected world.

What took the weight off my shoulders my Senior year was the certainty that I would receive a Federal Pell Grant to support my attendance to any college. My Pell Grants have been instrumental to my attendance at Trinity since 2019 – and now I am honored to share that because of the Pell Grant support & my financial aid package at Trinity, I will be graduating as Student Government Council President, as an honors student, and with a secured position to work as a Consultant at Accenture upon graduation. Had it not been for my Federal Pell Grants, my chances of going to college would have deteriorated **significantly**. Because of my Pell grants, I have unlimited options for choosing a fulfilling career path and paving a more dignified and safer future for my immigrant, hard-working family that would have been unimaginable to that Sophomore high school Michelle.

I stand here today to tell you that the Federal Pell Grants influence whether many students can attain a degree or not. Investing in someone's education is the **best** investment you can ever make, because the knowledge and training that we acquire in higher education can never be taken away and opens up a world of possibilities. I'd like to thank everyone who has supported the mission of the Federal Pell Grant program. At a time when the American dream can seem so unattainable, the Federal Pell Grants make it possible for me to be the first in my entire Latino family to go to college.

From the bottom of my hear, thank you!