


Nurturing a strong sense of community shapes the heart of the COM experience, and perhaps nowhere is that more evident than in Dr. Helen Castellanos Brewer's world.

A FORCE FOR POSITIVE CHANGE:

DR. HELEN CASTELLANOS BREWER WORKS TO RESHAPE STUDENT EXPERIENCE





As the new vice president for student services at College of the Mainland, Brewer is passionate about providing an exceptional student experience. She works diligently to advocate on behalf of students – whether that’s addressing equity issues or changing students’ perspective of higher education – to ensure that every student is equipped with the necessary resources and support to navigate their unique road to success.

And for many community college students, that road can be paved with unexpected challenges along the way, all too often making it difficult for them to achieve their educational goals.

That’s where Dr. Brewer steps in.

“My job is to make sure I am helping to address outcomes in terms of graduation and retention,” Brewer said. “It’s vital to help students accomplish their goals, and if we don’t do that, then I’m not doing my job.”

While those are sound words from a seasoned leader with many years of higher education experience under her belt, Brewer’s own story did not come without its share of twists and turns along the way.

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Brewer's journey began after her parents immigrated to the United States from Guatemala in the 1970s. Proud of her humble beginnings, she was raised in Maryland with two younger siblings whom she also helped rear. Serving as a translator for her Spanish-speaking parents, she quickly grew to find strength in learning to bridge the gap between her two worlds.

"Sometimes people feel sorry for you when you're in those roles, but I find they help you develop the strength to persevere through very challenging times," she said.

Attending an all-girls Catholic school as a teenager proved to be quite the transformative experience when she found herself immersed in

a school community where her higher education aspirations were nurtured in a deep and meaningful way.

Though the experience was impactful, the transition to college did not come easy for her as a child of immigrants and first-generation college student. So, she set off to find the path that was right for her.

"At 17 years old, I was trying to see how to go to college and how we are going to pay for it," Brewer explained.

That's when she decided to attend community college. And she'll tell you that the experience did not come without its own set of challenges.

"As a first-generation college student who was working to pay for college, you don't feel as though you're in an environment that's familiar, and you don't realize that there is a support system in place," she said.

But after transferring to the University of Maryland to earn her bachelor's degree, she was inspired to start the first Latina sorority in the state – a bold step to provide a safe, inclusive space so that students like her could feel pride in their culture and be in community with each other.

That experience was one of many that helped shape her into the leader she is today. After going on to complete her postgraduate studies, her innate sense of awareness soon gained clarity. And it is through this lens that allows her to be more culturally conscious and better connect with the unique needs of COM students.



“I understand that many of our students live in two different worlds – one where their family may not understand the importance of being a first-generation college student and another that expects them to have background information that maybe their family cannot provide for them,” she said.

This ability to “see the gaps” is a skill that she honed throughout the years. Ultimately, she embraced that skill because she personally understands education’s profound and widespread impact.

“It changed my social and socioeconomic trajectory – not only for me, but for my family,” Brewer said. “I wanted to work in higher education to make changes for other people and their families.”

And those changes are abundant.

At COM, she strives to improve student support systems in a more intentional way to address challenges that affect minority students. She is currently studying this through the Aspen Rising Presidents Fellowship, a highly selective leadership program preparing the next generation of community college presidents to transform institutions to achieve higher and more equitable levels of student success.

The opportunity allows her to bring new insight to College of the Mainland.

“My goal is to look at a broader picture of how all the services connect to one another and making sure we are aligning what we do here with high-impact practices happening nationally,” Brewer said.

It’s through her innovative and holistic approach to higher learning that those changes are evident. From improving access to virtual student services to creating a more personalized approach for new students with enrollment coaches, Brewer leads with a sharp focus on embracing the strength of the COM community to foster an engaging and personalized student experience.

“The more you get the community involved in making changes, the more likely students are to be successful,” she said.

From alleviating financial barriers to helping students navigate their higher education journey as a first-generation college student, Brewer’s role as the vice president for student services is a personal one for her – one where her own story comes full circle.



Reflecting back on her journey, she has a message for students who may be considering higher education but are nervous to explore what that road may entail.

“Education, regardless of where you are socioeconomically, is one thing that people can never take away from you. And it is unequivocally the most life-changing pursuit that you can ever partake in. It’s a time for exploring who you are. If you just don’t quit and if you just keep going, the reward will outweigh all of the sacrifices that you need to make - not only for yourself but for your family too.”

**Listen to a message
from Dr. Brewer.**

