

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MS. SHELA HIDALGO AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE NATIONAL CENTER FOR
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Hand in Hand: Service Learning and College Completion

Thank you for joining me this afternoon. I have been given the immense pleasure of speaking to you today.

My name is Shela Hidalgo, and I am a Mesa Community College graduate, an AmeriCorps alumnus, a former Phi Theta Kappa officer, and last year I was one of nine students who planned, implemented and hosted the Arizona Governor's 16th Annual Conference on National and Community Service. For only being 20 years old, I feel as though I have already accomplished so much in my life and I am excited for the future.

So why am I telling you about my accomplishments? Is it because I know you all will be forced to sit and listen? No, I want to highlight these important accomplishments in my life so that I can honor the mentors who have helped me get where I am today.

While growing up, most kids have their parents as role models. My situation was a little unique. My birth parents were unavailable. My father, a drug dealer, and my mother, a prostitute, left my twin sister and me to fend for ourselves.

By the time I was 11, I knew that I was different, that this was not the life I wanted to lead. At that time, I didn't have positive role models in my life. I had never heard of the word "mentor" and the only one I could rely on was myself. Two months after my 13th birthday and after several traumatic events involving my parents, I chose to leave my family and became a ward of the state. My twin sister however, she stayed with my parents and is now a product of her environment. She currently is a

stripper with 3 young children in the foster care system. My journey growing up, moving from house to house, family to family, offered me little stability and most importantly, no place to call my home.

There is a poem by Robert Frost that has deep meaning to me and is the reason I chose the lifestyle I lead now. In fact it is so important to me that I have it engraved on a necklace. When times are hard, I am feeling down, and all I want to do is give up because it is so much easier to admit defeat than to keep trying, it encourages me to have the conviction to be successful and serves as a constant reminder of who I am and where I am going.

“Two roads diverged in a wood and I-I took the one less traveled and that has made all the difference.”

Even though the odds were against me, I excelled in school. School gave me a place to call home and I felt as though it was the only thing that would never leave me. I was driven, driven to be the person I knew I could be.

I took on leadership positions and was inducted into the Junior Honor Society. I was president of several clubs on campus, an honors student, and I could be found volunteering and attending leadership development retreats; that was, of course, when I had a day off from working full time to pay for my crappy apartment and gas for my 1982 Ford LTD, which I lovingly named “the boat.”

Serving in these leadership roles gave me **my first** experience of being mentored. With the help of my principal and high school counselors, I took my involvement to a state level. I participated in a non-profit program, Valley Teen Leadership, and served as the President for the Mayor’s Youth Committee for two consecutive terms. When I graduated from high school, I wasn’t sure what I would do. I couldn’t afford a public university and wasn’t educated about scholarships. My high school counselors weren’t aware of my situation because I was so embarrassed; I just wanted to fit in with my

classmates so I kept my struggles a secret. With working a full time job, I needed classes that were flexible and that I could do on my own schedule.

It was then, with the help of these counselors, that I enrolled at Mesa Community College on a Presidential Scholarship. Taking honors classes and becoming involved in service learning opened **a new chapter in my life.**

It was through the Center for Service Learning that I met a woman named Elise Sweet. Elise was an advisor for the service learning center at the time and after learning about my involvement in high school, and my concerns about not being involved enough at MCC, she encouraged me to join AmeriCorps, a government program that allowed me to serve and make an impact on my community while being able to receive an education award to help fund my future.

I did my term of service at Sunshine Acres Children's Home where I tutored young children and served as an assistant for the school's director, Susan Husxter. Being there mentoring children who were in similar positions to myself was more gratifying than any award I have ever received. I loved walking into the school and seeing my friends, teaching them decimal places, listening to their fears, their past, and where they want to go in the future. Everyday there was a fight over who would sit by me at lunch and that made my work even more amazing. However, it wasn't always easy when I first started volunteering there.

When I first started, I was asked to assist a young man with his homework. When I tried to help him, he resisted my attempts and for weeks, he made my time spent at Sunshine Acres very difficult. The more he resisted, the more I pushed for him to like me. I'm a people pleaser that way. Finally after a few months of me being at the Acres every day, he asked if he could sit by me at lunch.

Flabbergasted, I eagerly accepted. There was no way I was letting the opportunity pass me by.

It was at lunch that he opened up to me about his past. He said that he never remembered living in a house before and that before he was brought to the Acres, he was living in a box on the side of the street with his mother. The conversation went on from there and after lunch he hugged me. When I left that day I wished him a happy weekend and he came over to me and said "I am happy that you have not left and I'm sorry."

To this day, I do not realize the impact I had on him, but I don't think he understands the impact he had on me either.

As my term of service drew near, I was honored by being nominated as a LeaderCorps member. LeaderCorps members are AmeriCorps members who are chosen to represent their division and to plan the Governor's Annual Conference on National and Community Service, along with a slew of other responsibilities. As a LeaderCorps member, I helped in the planning of AmeriCorps week, and served as an ambassador for other AmeriCorps projects. I took day trips to travel to various high schools that had Learn and Serve programs to help with their endeavor for the year and to participate in Learn and Serve Camps as a camp counselor.

I was able to learn a lot about our government and how it runs in terms of service, as well as discovering needs on a state level and not just in my community. I gained new leadership skills and other skills that allowed me to be a more well-rounded individual. I have taken what I learned during this 7 month program and brought it back into my school, my service site, and into my other organizations.

Towards the end of my LeaderCorps term, Elise Sweet introduced me to the director for the Center of Service Learning, Duane Oakes. With his encouragement, I became involved with the International Honor Society and Phi Theta Kappa.

I soon became the Vice President of Hallmarks at the MCC - Red Mountain campus. I did my best to make sure that the members on the Red Mountain campus were educated in our 4 Hallmarks of **Scholarship, Leadership, Service, and Fellowship**. I created a Leadership Development Series for the students so they could attend workshops that would strengthen their skills and educate them about issues concerning the world.

The series included workshops on Public Speaking and Sustainability, to name a few. I made sure the students were aware of scholarships and leadership programs that were available. I even went into classrooms and recruited members and informed them on not only Phi Theta Kappa, but the benefits of the Honors Program and Service Learning. I am proud to say that this year, the Omicron Beta's executive team is filled with some of my recruits.

For our college project, I served as a mentor for incoming honors freshman. I was now able to take all the knowledge I had gained about honors, Mesa Community College, service learning and other aspects about the college and pass it along to new presidential scholars.

I also became involved in our Honors in Action project, a project which was designed to educate the community members, parents, teachers, and students about the importance of family planning and safe sex. I was given the opportunity to travel to high schools and educate students about the importance of college completion and retention.

When Bob Shogren, the Executive Director of the Arizona Governor's Commission on Service and Volunteerism, asked the Phi Theta Kappa project committee to do a workshop at Arizona's first ever Summit on Service Learning and Volunteerism, we were all thrilled. As a group, we were able to bring this important issue to a higher caliber, and as a person, I was overjoyed that someone from my background was being asked to help present at such an important event.

If it were not for these mentors and their guidance, I would not have known about these programs or had the wonderful opportunity to invest my time and energy in them and into serving my community.

I graduated from MCC in May as an All Arizona Academic Team scholar and I will be attending Arizona State University for Speech Language Pathology with a minor in non-profit leadership. One day I dream of going to New York City and attending Columbia University for Graduate school.

I have this dream because my mentors constantly pushed me to dream bigger and reach higher. It is because of the, that I know nothing is out of my league if I have the heart to work hard and go after what I want.

Most importantly, I am becoming the kind of person my mentors would be proud of. I am someone who never quits, someone who speaks up when an injustice is being done and someone who is always willing to lend a helping hand.

So who exactly are these mentors? You've heard me say a few names and titles but what did they do that was so grand?

You don't have to be a "person of influence" to be influential. In fact, the most influential people in my life are probably not even aware of the things they've taught me. Cartoonist Scott Adams said that and it holds true for me today.

Let me first explain Elise Sweet to you. Elise was more than just a person that who updated me on campus activities. Elise was one of the first persons I opened up to about my personal story. She was always there to listen, to give me a hug, and to just chat about life. It is because she believed in me that she was willing to write me countless letters of recommendation for different activities. Elise opened my world up to service, honors and Phi Theta Kappa.

It was through Elise that I met my next mentor, Duane Oaks. It was under his leadership and guidance that I applied for the All Arizona Academic Team. Duane is not given enough credit for what he does, and for the students he helps. He supported me when I wanted to bring a Leadership Development Series to the Red Mountain campus, and he is always ready with some sort of “teaching moment.”

What I admire the most about Duane is his commitment to his students. This last year was a year of growth for me. I have had to learn several hard and important life lessons, and through it all, Duane was understanding, supportive and helped me to see the value in every lesson. It takes a person of great character and strength to deal with a group of students year after year, all who come from different backgrounds, lifestyles, religions, different ideas and the conflicts that arise from this. But Duane handles it better than anyone I have ever met.

While I only touched upon two major players in my academic growth, I want to point out that mentors can be found in anyone and everywhere. I had one teacher, Gwen Argersinger, who proofread all my papers and essays. She critiqued my writing and it was through her diligence that I am now able to write strong and profoundly, and it is because of her that I am able to take constructive criticism.

I had another teacher who prepared me for all my speaking engagements. My honors professors Betsy Hertzler, Scott Russell and even Dr. Mabry were there for amazing conversation, letters of recommendation and to help assist me in my college selection. These three professionals pushed me to think outside my area of comfort in terms of colleges. They encouraged me to look at Ivy league schools because they believe that I have what it takes.

I also had several advisors who were just fun and friendly and when times were rough and I didn't know what to make about an issue or decision, they offered me wisdom.

I found mentors in students as well, past and present Phi Theta Kappa officers who were willing to teach me the ropes, to tell me what classes they liked and what teachers to become friends with. They helped me refine myself as a person and they let me into their circle, no questions asked. They don't care about my past and they only encourage me in my future endeavors. I have now made lifelong friends and I have discovered that sometimes family can consist of people who you WANT in your life and it has nothing to do with blood relation.

Over the years I have learned that just as the saying goes "It takes a village to raise a child." it really does take an entire school to "raise a student."

As students, we look for mentors in all different academic areas, some who we find by accident and some who find us.

Everyone in this room has the ability to be a mentor. Everyone has the power to effectively change the life of another in a positive manner. Mentors don't always have to play such a strong and dominant role in one's life like Elise or Duane did for me. Rather it is a group made up specialists in their own fields that help to mold a student and strengthen areas of that student.

This morning's keynote speaker, Stephen Patrick, asked me what my 5 year plan was. But I think what is most important is my legacy. One day I hope to open my own non profit, similar to that of Sunshine Acres and Homeward Bound, so that students in my former circumstance, which is no place to go and no family to turn to, can live. They can stay in school, get job training or therapy, and in turn, are productive members in our society. All a child needs is for someone to believe in him or her. If I can be that person or if a member on my staff can be that person, I don't see why I wouldn't be able to play a role in breaking the cycle of homelessness, substance abuse and domestic violence. Change starts here, through mentorship, through educational programs and through hope. I am here, standing before you not because of my personal and professional accomplishments, but because of the patience, wisdom,

and unyielding persistence of my mentors. Imagine how many other children we can touch just by reaching out our hand and being a mentor.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you about mentorship and how it has assisted me along my personal journey.