



Laura Molina Rodriguez  
Princeton University, '21



# Caps Off to Our 2021 Graduates!



# Welcome!

Thank you for being part of the College Possible family. We are so glad to have you here.

Whether you're just reading about College Possible for the first time, or you're very familiar with us, this is a great piece for you. It includes compelling stories from a diverse sector of the 1,656 students we served in the past year. These students joined our program as juniors in high school, and they stuck with it all the way until they graduated with a bachelor's degree — amidst a global pandemic.

Each student has a different story, a different set of strengths and a different set of talents to offer this world. We are so grateful that Brandon, Lisbeth, Angie, Laura and Gabby were all willing to share a piece of their story with us, and with you.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unbelievable upheaval for students and their college journeys. Despite numerous challenges navigating a pandemic that had inequitable impacts on their communities and families, they persisted.

Reading the stories of our students gives me hope for our future — despite significant challenges they are already doing great things. I'm struck by their strength, strong sense of family, obligation to their community, curiosity and resilience in this moment. They are our future leaders and that gives me hope. I'm confident as they begin their careers and grow as leaders with a seat at the table, they will bring about the changes our education system — and world — so desperately need.



Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emielle Nischik". The script is fluid and cursive.

Emielle Nischik  
Executive Director

# College Access Highlights

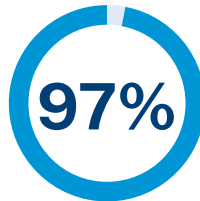


**708**

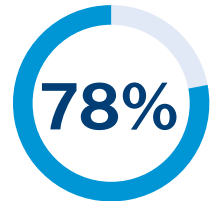
**HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**  
served in Oregon



**APPLIED**  
to at least one  
college or university



**ADMITTED**  
to college



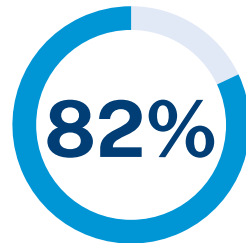
**ENROLLED**  
in college directly  
after high school  
*(high school class of 2020)*

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# College Success Highlights



**948**  
**COLLEGE STUDENTS**  
served



**PERSISTED**  
from the first to the  
second year of college  
*(students enrolled from the  
high school class of 2019)*



**96**  
**COLLEGES ATTENDED**  
by our students



# What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up?

## Angie Nguyen

### YEARS IN PROGRAM:

5

Parkrose High School,  
Class of 2018

Portland State  
University, Graduating  
Summer 2021

### DEGREE:

BS, Accounting

As a little kid, I never came up with a “good” answer to the question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” I don’t remember if I had any particular job that I was excited about. In high school, the pressure became more intense as I started to think about what I wanted to do after graduating. I joined College Possible mostly because I believed getting an education was important and partly to find some answer to this age-old question that my parents, relatives and teachers would ask me more frequently.

Neither of my parents, who are immigrants, graduated from college. Especially with four kids (myself being the oldest), money was always a topic in the house. I remember my mother suggesting I become a doctor or anything in the medical field. Anything that makes me successful and earns money. Anything except the arts or liberal arts. I grew tired of hearing it, so I always came up with an excuse like I can’t stand the blood (which is more or less still true). We weren’t poor, but I could sense this frustration in my family. I understand now that my parents just want the best for their children.

**College Possible helped me navigate high school and college by providing coaching and other resources I didn't know about or couldn't otherwise access.**

I gained valuable insight and different perspectives from each coach who had *been there, done that*. One coach's message that stuck with me was that I don't have to have everything figured out. In terms of careers, what's important is that I identify what I like and dislike while keeping in mind that things could change. Finding support, doing good research and asking questions about myself (strengths, weaknesses, abilities) are some of the most important skills that my coaches left me with.

I'm proud to be where I am today, even though I still don't have a definite answer as to what I want to be when I grow up. I'm not sure where I'll end up, but I learned from my coaches that I need to take one step at a time. They also helped me realize that I need to set my own goals for myself and that ultimately, I'm in control of my life. I'll be finishing up my Bachelor of Science in accounting this summer and starting the master's program in taxation this fall at Portland State University. I decided to pursue my master's to explore my interests in the tax field and to earn enough credits to take the CPA exam. After graduating, I hope to pursue a career in tax.



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# Brandon's College Journey

## Brandon Parsons

### YEARS IN PROGRAM:

8

Gresham High School,  
Class of 2015

Mount Hood Community  
College, 2018

Western Oregon  
University, 2021

### DEGREE:

BS, History

My intent to attend Oregon State University (OSU) came from two factors: their natural science department and my twin brother. In our sophomore year of high school, my brother asked what I thought about going to OSU. Since I wanted to do pre-med at the time, I told him it was one of my top landing spots. So, we decided to go there together. Although he did not follow me there two years later, I went anyway.

The financial aid package was not as favorable at OSU as other schools I applied to, but going there meant a lot to me. I wanted a “big name” school that everyone knew about, an esteemed science school, and a place where I could move away from home while still being in the state. Oregon State checked all my boxes. It was the school I wanted to attend since halfway through high school and I was determined to meet that goal.

My first term away from home was amazing. I loved being out on my own, the individual space to study, the ability to carry out my dream of going to a school away from home and working on my academic craft to be the best student I could be. I enjoyed going to the dining hall to



eat food, hanging out with friends in the dorms after class, and studying my tail off to get good grades. Going away for college is an experience I would 10/10 recommend for every college student. The transition felt smooth at first, but I quickly faced immense academic stress and severe anxiety after struggling in my math class. **The stress I had over a simple math class — even a score on one test — helped me understand that I was doing the wrong thing. I did not want to major in science, and I did not need to be in a “big name” school.**

I transferred to Mount Hood Community College because I had to go home. I needed time to think, calm my nerves down and focus on how to support my mental health while balancing my major choice. And that's exactly what I did. I knew I didn't want to do pre-med anymore, so I chose history because that was my favorite subject. My goal from that point on was to become a social studies teacher. I spent two years at Mount Hood which was, to be honest, not fun.

I didn't like going to college and living back home. To me, it didn't feel like the college experience. I wanted to get that university experience back again. Moreover, I felt like a bit of a failure for coming home and “not making it” at university. Though ultimately, I wasn't a failure. That's just how I felt about myself at the time.

The academic transition from Oregon State to Mount Hood was seamless. I went from taking chemistry and college level math to basic pre-requisites, history courses and Spanish. It felt much easier for me, and I was able to succeed academically without the burden of self-induced pressure to perform at my peak.

The experiences at Mount Hood and Oregon State were completely different. At OSU, I lived on campus and was fully immersed in the



Going away for college is an experience I would 10/10 recommend for every college student.



college life. At Mount Hood, I lived with my mom, had family time and worked part-time, trying to juggle so much outside of academics. Despite the much shorter tenure at Oregon State, I had a much more enjoyable time on campus there than back home at Mount Hood. I was driven to get back to that university-away-from-home lifestyle.



... I went to Western Oregon — a school I visited with College Possible during my junior year of high school. I remember falling in love with campus immediately.



So, I went to Western Oregon — a school I visited with College Possible during my junior year of high school. I remember falling in love with campus immediately. The buildings and trees gave me a calm feeling in the pit of my stomach. The campus was so beautiful, it took my breath away. I felt like I was at home. The campus and their teacher education program contributed most to my decision to attend Western. It turned out to be the best decision of my life.

The transition to Western went well. I was ready to get away from home back in Gresham and head south for Monmouth. It was an easy decision to make, and my family supported me fully. I was motivated to go back on a university campus and finish my college degree. After calming down the initial nerves and pressure to perform well in college, I was ready to get a second wind at moving away from home. I blossomed immediately on campus.

I performed well in my classes, I ate a good amount of food on campus, made plenty of friends in the dorms, in classes, on the basketball court, and delegated my time well to not overstress myself. My three years at Western turned out to be the best three years of my collegiate career. Although I did not graduate with a teaching degree like I originally planned, I did graduate with a degree in history and learned the most important thing when it comes to college is to **be yourself**.



My experiences from Oregon State and Mount Hood helped me become a more focused and organized college student. I was able to balance my studies with free time while managing to not become overwhelmed. Furthermore, I enjoyed the opportunity to live on campus because it was something I had been hoping to do since high school. By transferring between schools, I figured out what I really wanted from myself and how to properly handle the stress of college studies and balance my time.

**This unique path throughout college taught me a lot. It taught me to not worry about going to a “big name” renowned university. It taught me to be myself and work for what I care about, not to just focus on where the money is.** Although I did not graduate within four years, I was able to finish my college degree despite transferring multiple times. I am grateful for the experiences I gained through my collegiate career, and I have matured in a way that I would have been unable to otherwise.

Earning my college degree means literally everything to me. I am privileged to have put myself in a position to become college educated. **And I did it.**

# \$1 Million, Three Years, More Dreams Realized

**The Getting to Graduation — Leadership Circle** is a group of investors who are committed to education equity and are willing to make a commitment of \$7,500 or more. Together, we can make college dreams possible for more students from Oregon.

## **Thank you to our current Leadership Circle members:**

Anonymous

Sona Karentz Andrews  
& Steve Samuelson

Ginnie Cooper

Harold Goldstein & Carol Streeter

Clark Haass & Katharine Di Salle

Sarah Mathenia &  
Neumeier Taylor Foundation

Alice McCartor

James F. and Marion L.  
Miller Foundation

The Betsy Priddy Fund

The Renaissance Foundation

Jennifer Schuberth & John Urang

Ken & Marta Thrasher

Christine & David Vernier



# To Study, Or Not To Study?

## Gabby Bosso

### **YEARS IN PROGRAM:**

6

Gresham High School,  
Class of 2017

Portland State  
University, 2021

### **DEGREE:**

BA, Theater Arts

As a young hyperactive kid who did well in school, graduating college always seemed like the end goal. When I was six, I had dreamed of being like Steve Irwin and focusing on saving the cheetahs and wolves, my favorite animals at the time. I knew this would require a science degree of some kind. When I was 12, for a brief period of time, I wanted to be a lawyer simply so that I could show my superior argumentative skills and have a dramatic character arch eerily similar to that of Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*, so I knew I needed to make it to Harvard and earn a law degree. When I was 14, I entered into high school and fell madly in love with theater and acting. I decided that I wanted to pursue theater as my career and find myself in my studies. Only there was one problem that I soon had to face the harsh reality of.

While I always had assumed I would go to college and could envision myself in college, I had no idea how to get to college. My parents hadn't gone, both of my siblings dropped out, and my school counselors weren't well equipped to help me — and let's face it, they simply didn't have the time. During my sophomore year of high school there was an assembly where the

after-school programs all sent representatives to discuss what they do. Many of them seemed to not fit what I wanted, focusing mainly on STEM paths. **College Possible stepped forward and started explaining what they focused on. They wanted to help low-income, first-generation students achieve their dreams and graduate college. They explained that they help with writing and submitting college applications, waive fees, help you navigate FASFA, and can likely improve your ACT scores all for a twice a week after school commitment.** I understood roughly a third of what they were saying, which to me meant I really knew nothing about applying to colleges, so after the assembly I went straight to the office and picked up a form applying to College Possible.

As you may have guessed, I was accepted! While there were days where I really didn't want to go to session or times when I really didn't want to take another practice ACT, I am so thankful for the tools College Possible gave me and for the support I received from my coaches.

The education systems are complex and confusing. For me, it was incredibly valuable to have College Possible alongside to help navigate it all. Even in college there were numerous times where I doubted myself and my choices, questioning if it would be worth it for me to study.

Unsurprisingly to many, theater makers with liberal arts degrees often don't make a lot of money right out of college. Because of this and the nature of the art, there is a huge debate that floats around in the theater and film industry that going to college is actually more of a detriment to the actor and their process. Many seem to view studying acting in college as a waste of time and money, as there isn't anything you can learn there that you can't learn from going out and "doing it." They believe schools



The education systems are complex and confusing. For me, it was incredibly valuable to have College Possible alongside to help navigate it all.



create acting robots, filled with people who can recite lines in perfect timbre and rhythm, yet they have no real emotional life to their work. I have many opinions on this, but **I've come to realize in my journey that there is no right way to go, but accumulating more knowledge and techniques never hurt anyone.**

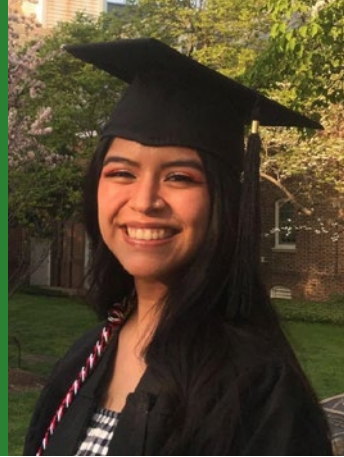
This is what I held onto every time I began to doubt whether or not I was innately talented enough to act or if my degree would mean anything. I'm so proud of myself for pushing through all of the tough times and having all of the tools College Possible and my mentors gave me in my tool belt available to use when I need them. When the voices of my peers would cycle through my mind, causing me to lose sight of pursuing what I love, I would remind myself that my way isn't the highway, but it's still my way and that is valid.



I'm so proud of myself for pushing through all of the tough times and having all of the tools College Possible and my mentors gave me in my tool belt available to use when I need them.



# David Douglas High School to Franklin & Marshall (And Back)



I had a positive upbringing despite the financial hardships my family faced. My parents immigrated to the United States with a vision of more opportunities for success for their children. So, once I reached middle school, I knew I wanted to go to college. Not because my parents urged me to, but because I had the intrinsic drive to learn. College felt like a dream that was a lifetime away. As I grew older, I realized I did not know where to start.

**Thankfully, College Possible reframed my dream into a goal and knew the steps required to get into secondary school.** College Possible provided me with an abundance of resources that I would not have had access to otherwise. From assistance in filling out the tedious FAFSA and CSS Profile to waiving the ACT fees, I trusted them to help with the details.

The team at College Possible recognized that I was a highly motivated student. I dove further into my college search on the weekends. I remember reading through various college information books and one school caught my eye: Franklin & Marshall College (F&M). The size and type of college was appealing to me; it is a

## Lisbeth Marquez- Delgado

**YEARS IN PROGRAM:**  
6

David Douglas High  
School, Class of 2017  
  
Franklin & Marshall  
College, 2021

**DEGREE:**  
BA, Government  
& Spanish

**CURRENT POSITION:**  
2021-2022 AmeriCorps  
High School Coach at  
David Douglas High  
School

small liberal arts school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Additionally, I had traveled to the East Coast a few times before college and I could imagine myself living there. I was nervous I would not be accepted; it was a more selective school than the in-state schools on my list. My nerves only motivated me to work harder on my college applications and later I was accepted to F&M.



I grew passionate about increasing accessibility to higher education for underrepresented groups, something that College Possible does in an admirable way with the near-peer coaching model.



I did not immediately confirm my acceptance to F&M. **My College Possible coach helped me figure out which college would be a good fit for me and financially feasible. They made it easy to visualize the financial aid packages for each school I was accepted to with a spreadsheet that included the various — and often underlying — costs of attending college.**

In comparison to other out of state schools, F&M offered me a generous financial aid package, which heavily influenced my decision to attend. Four years later, I had an in-person graduation,

which felt even more rewarding after spending half of my senior year at home due to the pandemic.

Even though I went to school across the country, it felt natural to stay connected with College Possible. Their curriculum was beneficial to me, but I realized there are still plenty of low-income students who do not have the same opportunity to prepare for college. I grew passionate about increasing accessibility to higher education for underrepresented groups, something that College Possible does in an admirable way with the near-peer coaching model. Throughout college, I volunteered with local youth in Lancaster to encourage students to pursue higher education. I want to share the knowledge I have about higher education.

As a first-generation, low-income, Latina college graduate, I am so grateful for College Possible’s unwavering support. **I am eager to pay it forward by going back to David Douglas to support students as a College Possible high school coach for the 2021-22 school year.** I enjoy making individual connections with students and watching them grow into leaders. Not only will I be able to further expand my professional network with recent graduates in Portland, but I will be able to strengthen my leadership skills in the classroom. I have great communication skills, but I want to improve my confidence with public speaking and believe this role will give me an opportunity to practice and hone those skills. Additionally, I want to support BIPOC communities in my future career, whether through law or public advocacy, and returning to the culturally diverse David Douglas High School community feels right. With my bachelor’s degree, I have made my parents’ vision a reality.



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# Trust Your Purpose and Lived Experience

## Laura Molina Rodriguez

### YEARS IN PROGRAM:

6

Reynolds High School, '17

Princeton University, '21

### DEGREE:

BA, African American studies, minor in Latino studies

### CURRENT POSITION:

Full-Stack Software Engineer in Portland, Oregon

I've known I wanted to go to college since middle school because my eldest sister had gone to college and my father talked to me about the value of a college degree. **I didn't realize it then, but getting to university would be a different experience for me than that of my sister's, who faced her own onslaught of challenges applying to college as an undocumented student.** In seventh grade, I was invited to join the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. In AVID, I learned about many aspects of the admission process, including the importance of grades and the value of extracurriculars.

In high school, I learned that test scores matter in college applications. Standardized tests were not my forte, which is why I was ecstatic to find out about College Possible. It was an easy decision to apply to College Possible because I felt welcomed and supported long before I discovered we'd get free test prep books.

In 10th grade, I found out that navigating the college application process would be harder than I ever imagined. When my father passed away in April 2015, I discovered it is easy to lose focus when what you are doing starts to feel like

it doesn't matter. Intrusive, grief-stricken thoughts of self-doubt made their way into my head for the first time.

I feel deeply indebted to College Possible and my coach Michelle Cifuentes for believing in me during a time of great sorrow. Michelle's unwavering confidence in my ability to attend college was a blessing. Because of her, and the incredible work all College Possible coaches do, I can say with utmost certainty that College Possible changed the trajectory of my life for the better.

**If there is one lesson I've learned from College Possible it's this:**

**trust your purpose and lived**

**experience.** Admittedly, this is a mantra I have long struggled to learn. Three years ago, I sat in my dorm room at the end of my freshman year of college. I'd just checked my grades. The shame I felt seeing my end of year GPA was near immobilizing. I was dismayed that the first thought that came to mind was: how did I, a first-generation, low-income student, deserve to be here? I learned what I was experiencing was called impostor syndrome. It became an internal battle to feel that I belonged and I sought help. I found support through Princeton's Scholars Institute Fellows Program (SIFP), a program that offers mentorship, academic enrichment and community to students from backgrounds historically underrepresented at Princeton. I also turned to my friends and found that I was not the only one experiencing impostor syndrome. I learned to recognize the signs, which made it easier to take a step back and remind myself that I was where I belonged. I promised myself I would push through and take on as many opportunities as I could, including learning to code.

I took my first programming class at the end of my freshman year. After two bad course grades, I gave up on the prospect of becoming a software engineer. I thought I was not smart enough to learn to code. It took me two years to realize that just because I stumbled doesn't mean



... I can say with utmost certainty that College Possible changed the trajectory of my life for the better.



I couldn't become a software engineer. Learning to code is as much about getting comfortable with failing and trying again as it is about understanding computer science concepts.

In those two years I also explored my interests in race and public policy, eventually declaring African American studies. I was privileged to study under sociologist Dr. Ruha Benjamin, who completely transformed my way of thinking about oppression and technology. She once said oppression is designed via explicit decisions. Then, what launched my interest back into tech was learning the following: there is no subjectivity in tech; In fact, technology has the potential to reproduce discrimination because behind every line of code is a human with biases. I encourage everyone to read her book *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* in which she describes how technology can (and has) deepen(ed) social inequities.

Taking on more programming classes was daunting after I received bad marks in two introductory courses, but I was determined to study how algorithms could reproduce oppression. I started to go to office hours with a list of questions. **In the moments that I felt the horrible weight of impostor syndrome or felt lost about my path, I found strength in knowing that I have something to contribute and that I am never alone. I reminded myself that I have the right to understand. I have the right to learn. I have the right to be here.**

In my last semester at Princeton, I thought a lot about my identity as a first-generation, low-income Latina and the importance of taking up space at Princeton as an Indigenous P'urhépecha woman. For so long, our experiences have been invalidated and erased to the point that sometimes we start to believe the fallacy that we don't belong in higher education. The reality is that our voices are vital contributions and critical in any effort to transform our society for the better.

I graduated from Princeton University on May 16, 2021, with a Bachelor of Arts in African American studies and a minor in Latino studies. Today, I am a software engineer at a medical device company in Portland, Oregon. I write code that helps people live better lives. Every day, I ask myself what kind of values are we building into our world? You don't have to build software to realize **we all have the responsibility to use our privileges to ensure no harm comes to our communities, that we uplift one another and that we do everything to dismantle oppressive systems.** After all, college is possible because of people who seek to transform the edifice.

# Take Another Step with College Possible.

## **Invest in Future College Graduates:** [CollegePossible.org/GiveOregon](https://CollegePossible.org/GiveOregon)

### **Give This to a Friend!**

Pass on these stories to someone who might be interested in learning more about education equity and the work that College Possible is doing.

### **Join Our Email List for Monthly Updates**

[CollegePossible.org/Email](https://CollegePossible.org/Email)

### **Follow Us On Social Media**



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@CollPossibleOR



College Possible

### **Volunteer**

We have a variety of volunteer opportunities throughout the year, like supporting family engagement workshops, one-on-one coaching with high school seniors and being a leader on our ambassador board or investment council.

**For more information, email Christina Carl at**  
[CCarl@CollegePossible.org](mailto:CCarl@CollegePossible.org).

*Please remember College Possible in your will or estate plan.*



College Possible is making college admission and success possible for students from low-income backgrounds through an intensive curriculum of coaching and support.

**Learn more: [CollegePossible.org/Oregon](https://CollegePossible.org/Oregon)**