

FROM A DISTANCE: THE VALUE OF

by Jeff Simmons

Rocio “Rosie” Ville and Manuel Yañez arrived at Excelsior College’s virtual doorstep for different reasons, but with similar passions – the pursuit of a higher education degree.

The two have vastly different backgrounds and challenges. Yet they are joined by a desire to acquire a competitive edge by advancing along the higher education pipeline. The tracks are similar: study hard, get a degree and achieve one’s goals.

“I always tell people that a degree gives you the confidence to knock on any door without having any fear,” Ville said recently. “You feel better about sending your résumé in to get an



Rocio “Rosie” Ville, Excelsior College graduate, crime specialist and victim advocate, New York State Office of Victim Services

interview, and there is a better chance they will call you.”

Ville moved to the United States when she was 30 years old, settling with her husband and children in upstate New York in 1997. She had always valued higher education, but found the courses she had taken in international relations were not helpful when she arrived here. She sought a bachelor’s degree from the outset.

“I needed a bachelor’s degree from the United States,” she said. “I wanted to go forward with my education and get a better job, and they require a better degree from the United States, so I knew what I had to do was get one. I went on a few interviews, and most of them asked if I had a degree from [a college in] the United States.”

But transferring those credits was difficult, and she said she confronted myriad obstacles attempting unsuccessfully to transfer course credits from a college in the Ukraine and one in her native Colombia to an institution in New York state.

A friend recommended she consider Excelsior, because of its accessibility and convenience. Her subsequent experience was light years beyond her expectations, she said, as the transfer process readily granted her access.

“I chose Excelsior because I knew I could take classes online, and it was very convenient for me,” she said.

It allowed her to more fluidly manage her busy schedule. In addition to caring for her children, she worked both full- and part-time jobs and took care of her mother, who is disabled, and was involved in community activities.

“I started with Excelsior, class by class,” she said, methodically completing work, finishing chores at home, and then setting aside a minimum of two hours every weeknight to click onto the computer and engage in coursework in the fields of criminal justice and homeland security. “I was doing it little by little every day, but I usually handed in my assignments on time, by the deadline!”

Ville said she always valued education, even when finances and time were tight. She set goals, always sought to challenge herself, and studied hard. “Education,” she said, “changes every day, so I wanted to advance in my career professionally and also in education.”

Her persistence has paid off. In 2011, Ville earned a Bachelor of Science in liberal studies and a certificate in homeland security, and brimmed with enthusiasm when discussing her graduation ceremony in the Empire Plaza in Albany, along with thousands of other graduates.

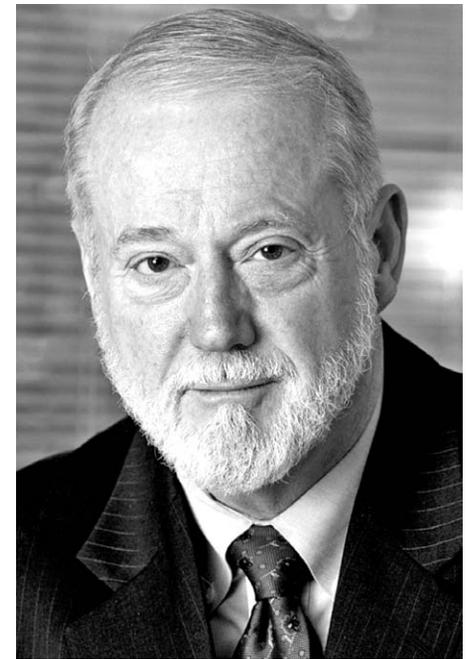
“I did it,” she said, “and it was my achievement. Nobody can take this away from me. It was a very good feeling of accomplishment, that I

had reached the goals I had set for myself.”

She currently works as a crime specialist and victim advocate for the New York State Office of Victim Services. But she isn’t stopping anytime soon; Ville will soon start pursuing a master’s degree from Excelsior College.

“I was really satisfied with everything at Excelsior,” she said. “The professors and advisors helped me on the phone, and they were all very organized and put everything on track for me,” she said. “I think I am very prepared now for anything.”

Founded as Regents College in 1971 and chartered as a private, nonprofit institution in 1998, the accredited institution was renamed Excelsior



Dr. John Ebersole, president, Excelsior College

College. The college, which is expert in online and distance learning, awards degrees at the associate and bachelor’s levels in liberal arts, nursing, business, technology and health, and at the master’s level in liberal studies, nursing and business. Additionally, Excelsior offers certificate programs from its schools of Business & Technology, Health Sciences, Liberal Arts and Nursing.

“The typical student at Excelsior is a 39-year-old working adult who is trying to earn a degree while juggling the many demands of jobs and

AN EDUCATION AT



family life. So the ability to complete their education at their own pace is important," said its president, Dr. John Ebersole.

"Most have earned some prior college credit and want to use as much of this as possible as transfer credit toward degree requirements. The more transfer credit that is accepted, the closer a student will be toward earning a degree, and by not having to repeat coursework already completed, fulfilling degree requirements will be less costly overall."

Excelsior has considerable experience in serving students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example, more than one-third of its 37,000 students self-identified as having



Andrew Wheeler, assistant dean of the School of Business and Technology, Excelsior College

non-White backgrounds, and more than 3,000 are of Hispanic heritage. The school reports that more than 35 percent are from groups historically underrepresented in higher education.

"All our students, regardless of their backgrounds, have to meet the same rigorous academic standards to graduate," Ebersole said. "Our mission is to provide access to a college degree, especially among those that historically may have been underrepresented in higher education."

Andrew Wheeler, assistant dean of the School of Business and Technology, started at Excelsior eight years ago, first as a counselor in admissions, his interest piqued by distance learning. The perception of distance learning, he said, has evolved over time.

"When I started, folks were very doubtful about it; adults returning to school don't have a lot of money to spend, and they have to spend their money very carefully," Wheeler said. Additionally, some less-reputable distance-learning operations generated negative media attention, casting a cloud over the practice. "Online education and distance learning were really put under the microscope."

However, amid lingering national economic woes, the validity of a degree has shifted, and technological advances have helped potential students to become better expert in screening schools and achieving more appropriate financial arrangements. Barriers erected by brick-and-mortar schools often carry obstacles for non-White and nontraditional students, who often migrate to distance or online learning.

"Convenience," he said, "is a huge, huge factor."

The School of Business and Technology, which enrolls close to 600 students, has seen incremental growth in its Hispanic enrollment, which now stands at 10 percent in business and 8.4 percent in technology.

While not at the level yet to achieve a Hispanic-Serving Institution designation, Excelsior is displaying continued growth on the path to that achievement. It recently joined the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and has forged an academic partnership with a college in Ecuador.

Recognizing the urgent need for English as a Second Language training, Excelsior recently launched ESL-WOW, a free, publicly available resource for all non-native English speakers struggling with college-level writing. The project, funded with a \$581,600 grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, is housed within Excelsior's Online Writing Lab.

The institution also is finding that strategic partnerships with Hispanic associations better display the value of a higher education degree. Excelsior has forged partnerships with a number

of Latino associations, such as the National Association of Hispanic Nurses and the National Latino Peace Officers Association.

"We have joined forces with Latino organizations so that we can reach out as far and wide as we can to fulfill our mission and to help those organizations achieve their own respective missions," Ebersole said. "We have degree programs that meet the needs of persons working in these fields so working with organizations serving persons in these professions is a natural fit for all."

Edwin Maldonado, president of the National Association of Latino Peace Officers, said the partnership with Excelsior has provided a vehicle to its membership to enhance their educa-



Manuel Yañez, Excelsior College graduate

tion. Such affiliations provide a reduction in registration fees.

A former Plainfield, N.J., police officer, he currently is a detective in the Union County Prosecutor's Office's homicide division. He valued the promise of a degree, and has been an Excelsior student as well.

He is now four classes away from a bachelor's degree in public administration, and hopes to complete his studies later this year.

"We all have an equal opportunity to take

advantage of education,” he said. “The important thing is that people get their education, no matter if it’s right out of high school or if they are in their 30s or 40s; it’s never too late to seek educational guidance.”

Overall, Excelsior’s Hispanic population stands at 8.32 percent; African-American, at 22.6 percent; and White, at 60.1 percent. Female students outnumber male ones, 59 percent-to-41 percent.

Unlike four-year institutions, the traditional measure of graduation rates doesn’t apply to a distance learning institution like Excelsior. All students are part-time, and the average enrollee arrives with 70 credits already completed at other institutions.

Accordingly, Excelsior applies a six-year (72-month) window for its bachelor’s programs; the current completion rate over this time is 61.57 percent, with Hispanic students far outpacing their non-Hispanic colleagues: 66.6 percent of Hispanic students graduate within six years, where 61.9 percent of African-American students do so, and 61 percent of White students do so.

The majority of Excelsior students are from out of New York state, at 85.3 percent, whereas only 14 percent live in the state.

Additionally, about 30 percent are active-duty or reserve military personnel. With many veterans hesitant to seek help from administrators or even professors, Excelsior has looked to establish mentorship programs to pair up veterans with others who’ve already gone through the academic process.

Excelsior’s program, available within its Online Veterans’ Center, is open to all veteran students returning to college.

Yañez falls into two of those boxes: he has been on active duty for some time, and has moved from state to state – able to continue his studies no matter where his service has deployed him.

Yañez, a native Californian who is 41 and of

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Mexican descent, first discovered Excelsior after he left the Air Force in 1992.

A Desert Storm veteran, he started at a junior college, envisioning a career as a registered nurse, and was accepted to a program. But a teacher told him he should pursue welding, which did not interest him.

“I was the only Hispanic male at the time,” he

said, acknowledging financial obstacles that caused him to struggle to achieve his aspirations.

He then attended a career institute in the mid- to late ’90s and became an LVN nurse. He had enrolled in Regents College at the time, receiving an associate degree in science and nursing from Excelsior in December 1998.

“I had a dream to become a registered nurse, and they fulfilled it,” he said.

In 2000, he had enlisted in the Army Reserves, and was inactive for four years. But he enjoyed the field and envisioned escalating the military ladder. He took work as a hospice nurse and as a home health aid. During this time, he recognized that higher education was a valued necessity to accomplish that goal.

“If I wanted to make major, I knew I needed a bachelor’s degree,” he said. He had been out of school for about 10 years but “gave it a shot.”

So he returned to Regents, by this time called Excelsior, and had started pursuing his courses online. He had been stationed in Maryland, but left there for Fort Lewis in Washington.

“When I started, the teachers were very encouraging, and I didn’t feel like I had to go to a [traditional] college. I didn’t have the time because I was working a lot of hours, so I needed the flexibility and encouragement that teachers there gave me,” he said.

He now envisions achieving a higher rank as colonel in the Army and strongly insists his degree will position him well for the promotion. Now equipped with his bachelor’s, he is en route to completing a master’s sometime later this year.

“Thanks to the support from Excelsior – it will help where I want to go,” he said. “I was the first guy to graduate in my family,” he said. “I wish I could inspire more people to go to college, if you want to compete in this world.”



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