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Students learn from Hispanic heritage panel

By Jay'Mi Vazquez
Managing Editor

In celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, a panel of professors and faculty came together to reflect on how their cultural roots shaped their academic and professional journeys.

The empowering lives panel discussion titled “Raíces y Alas: Navigating Identity and Thriving in Higher Education” took place on Sept. 17, highlighting the importance of community, mentorship and cultural advocacy in higher education.

“We have to recognize the Hispanic academic excellence and professionalism that we have here on our campus,” Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Sergio Pérez said.

The first panelist, Director of First Year Admissions Nilvio Perez, shared his experience as one of the first in his Dominican family born in the U.S. Growing up in a predominantly Italian neighborhood in New York, he embraced his Latino identity while navigating the cultural divide.

“Being Latino was never something that I dismissed,” Perez said.

Over time, Perez found purpose in helping others bridge cultural and language barriers, saying



Sergio Pérez, the vice president for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, leads discussion along with other panelists in the Adanti Student Center Ballroom on Sept. 17.

that he loves being that conduit to help people integrate into different communities.

Melanie Uribe, associate professor of graphic arts and director of the Latin American and Caribbean studies program brought the perspective of a Venezuelan immigrant.

She arrived in the U.S. just two weeks after graduating high school

at 16, without family or friends.

“Everything was brand new,” Uribe said.

Her resilience, shaped by her Venezuelan heritage, taught her the value of community, which is a theme she continues to emphasize for students.

Representation, she added, is vital for students to feel seen and supported.

Maribel Sanchez, the associate director of University Access Programs, offered a first-generation perspective.

Her family came from Puerto Rico to Connecticut through a program bringing workers to the tobacco fields.

Growing up in Hartford, Sanchez faced early language barriers and later, cultural adjustment

at a predominantly white college.

“It felt like I had to navigate all over again,” Sanchez said.

Today, she uses her story to guide first-generation students through their own transitions.

“I always lead with that in terms of my story and how I help others navigate their own journeys,” Sanchez said.

Sanchez echoed the

sentiments of all the panelists, saying she wants students to be seen and believe that their other people like them on campus supporting them.

Undergraduate Coordinator of Inclusive Education and Behavior Sciences Angela López-Velásquez spoke about her Colombian roots and the importance of embracing one's heritage.

She described how some students feel pressured to hide their cultural identity to fit in.

To counter this, she highlights the beauty of multilingualism, proudly owning her accent.

“I have an accent because that's the mark of bilingualism. This is where I come from,” López-Velásquez said.

She said she tells her students her story to encourage them to value their own linguistic and cultural differences.

The panel closed with a call for continued advocacy and systemic change, urging faculty to consistently check in with students and ensure they feel supported.

As Hispanic Heritage Month continues, the event acted as a powerful reminder: for many Latino students, their language, culture and community are not only central to their identity, but also to their academic and professional success.

PHOTO | JAY'MI VAZQUEZ

Patrick Dilger retires after nearly three decades

By Brianna Wallen
News Editor

For nearly three decades, Patrick Dilger has been a cornerstone of the campus community serving as the director of integrated communications and marketing. He is now retiring and leaves behind a legacy of commitment and connection.

“I actually feel very proud, and I feel privileged actually to have worked here,” Dilger said.

Dilger was most often recognized by students and faculty seeing his name at the top of their inbox. Dilger's informative emails kept the community connected and informed.

“The emails I send to you that have my name on it: I want you to look at it because I think it's important, and I also think that if you have any questions, you will respond to me,” Dilger said.

To the campus community, Dilger was more than a man behind the messages. He was a leader and communicator who guided students and staff.

Through his work, Dilger built trust, provided reassurance and ensured that every member of the community felt informed and supported.

“Sometimes, you're just doing your job, and you don't actually realize that you've made an impact on somebody,” Dilger said. “If I in my time here have helped someone to understand something a bit better, or to know that

something is happening that you really should be aware of or just stay out of harm's way, then that's good.”

Whether it was responding to questions about incidents, clarifying phishing emails, or sharing details about upcoming events, Dilger's consistent presence in each student's inbox served as a constant reminder that someone was looking out for the community.

“Part of my job is I'm the communicator. So, why can't I help you?” Dilger said. “If I have helped people in some way, then that's the best thing that I can carry away from here.”

Dilger's dedication to building connections through personal communication rather than automated emails helped to foster a sense of openness and trust across campus.

Before his role at the university, Dilger was the general reporter and assistant editor of Franklin County News, general assignment reporter of Gannett Westchester Newspapers and higher education reporter of New Haven Register.

With a background in reporting, Dilger is a professional in dissecting information and delivering clear messages.

“It's sort of a natural career shift because I found that all the skills that I had developed as a reporter — you know, being able to write concisely, being able to write clearly, being able

to do it on deadline really quickly and getting those ideas turned around so that people can understand it,” Dilger said. “That's all transferable from my time as a reporter.”

Of all the messages he delivered during almost 29 years at the university, Dilger said the most challenging came during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The thing with COVID was that there was so much information that we had to get out, not just to the community, but we had to do reports to the state and all this kind of thing,” Dilger said.

Dilger said that with the absence of a traditional 9-5 workday, he was working around the clock.

“I was working a lot at 10 and 11 o'clock at night, and there was so much to write,” Dilger said. “I was in Zoom meetings or Teams meetings all the time, and they soak up your time and your energy.”

Dilger carried the weight of delivering all messages, the big and the small updates.

Dilger said that some of the most difficult moments of his career occurred when his professional responsibilities collided with his personal life.

“Not long after my daughter passed, I had to deal with a student dying here, and I found that very, very tough, but I still had to write about it, and it's my job,” Dilger said.

Through those hard moments, Dilger said he found strength in the

support of the campus community.

“I had communities here who kind of lifted me up, and I found that work was kind of a welcome distraction, and so I poured myself into it, and if anything, I'd say I've become a more positive person since then,” Dilger said.

Since then, Dilger included the phrase “#liveyourlife” in his emails to motivate and inspire others. Dilger said he hopes the impact he made on the community will continue even after his retirement.

“That's what I believe, you know? Don't waste today because my daughter only got to 21, but she had a big, full life,” Dilger said. “Work hard, go for your ambitions, enjoy your family.”

While the emails from Dilger are now coming to an end, the impact of his service will continue to resonate across campus, even after his final “send.”



A headshot of Patrick Dilger, the director of integrated communications and marketing, before his retirement.

PHOTO | UNIVERSITY WEBSITE



Patrick Dilger and other faculty members at the Spike Lee distinguished lecture on May 7, 2023.

PHOTO | ISABEL CHENOWETH