When Victor Ramirez enrolled at Ridgewater in the fall of 2004, his goal was to earn an AA degree and then transfer into a program that would prepare him to teach Japanese and French. Later, he changed his mind and decided he wanted to work for a large company, so he switched gears and earned an AAS in Marketing and Sales Management. “I wanted to live the American dream,” he says.

Ramirez earned that degree last December but along the way, another dream took hold, this one to teach intercultural studies at the college level. That change in his career goal brought with it the pursuit of a second degree from Ridgewater, this one an AA in Liberal Arts that Ramirez will earn later this year. Following that, he plans to continue on and earn bachelor's and master's degrees, preferably at the University of Minnesota.

While serving as a student-at-large with the Minnesota State College Students Association (an association of Minnesota public two-year college students that works to ensure accessible, quality, and affordable public higher education), Ramirez became aware of organizations and programs that promote higher education to underserved and underrepresented students. The first in his own family to attend college, he's particularly aware of the obstacles—as well as the opportunities—that such students face, and became determined to help remove the former and increase the latter. “I realized I could do something else with my life,” he says of the change in his career plans.

Reaching out

Ramirez’s drive and dedication have not gone unnoticed. In fact, they earned him a coveted internship with the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MnSCU), where he has been working with the Diversity and Multiculturalism Division. That internship, which began in November and will run until June, drew applicants from throughout the state. “I
Ramirez has been heavily involved in the outreach program, which includes meeting with parents and potential students, as well as with community leaders. His work ethic, intelligence, and enthusiasm have earned him kudos from others at MnSCU, including Chancellor James McCormick. “We did a Super Weekend in January where we visited faith communities to talk about accessing opportunities in higher education,” Harris says. “We want people to start thinking about college when they’re in the fifth grade—not the 12th grade, and we want to make sure parents get the message.”

Several of those presentations were conducted with groups who did not speak English. Enter Ramirez, who accompanied Chancellor McCormick and served as a translator during a meeting with parents and prospective students. “Not many students get to serve with the chancellor,” Harris says. “He was very impressed with Victor. He is a fine young man and has done an excellent job. He is a hard worker, creative, and a self-starter. We hope we may be preparing him for a future in higher education.”

And that is exactly the road Ramirez will be traveling as he pursues an education that will qualify him to teach at the college level. He credits his education and experience at Ridgewater with setting a strong foundation for doing so. While he hopes he has made an impact on the people he has met through his internship, he says his work with MnSCU has had a powerful effect on him. “As a person, it changed me a lot—not only my career path, but my way of thinking,” he says. “There are many students of color and minorities who need an education to become better people and better citizens. We’re in this great country where everything is possible, and we still have these gaps in education. It makes me want to be an advocate for these people.”

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