First-Generation Student, Now SNRE Prof, Found His Niche at the UA — Twice

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
September 2018

José R. Soto[1] was well into his senior year at Nogales High School before he started considering what he wanted to do with his life.

The idea of pursuing higher education appealed to Soto, who saw the University of Arizona as his ultimate goal. But, he says, "I didn't know what college was, I didn't know how to get there."

Soto decided to set out on the journey, and with guidance along the way from mentors he found at the UA, he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees, in 2006 and 2008. He returned to campus in 2017 when he joined the School of Natural Resources and the Environment[2], part of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, as an assistant professor specializing in coupled natural-human systems.

For Soto, his UA homecoming is about more than returning to the place that helped change his life. He is eager to use his experiences to serve as a mentor to first-generation students and enhance the UA's status as a Hispanic-Serving Institution[3].

"Growing up, I didn't have a context to really understand how difficult it would have been to do this," says Soto, who earned his doctorate in food and resource economics from the University of Florida in 2013. "We did hear about the University of Arizona, and we followed the Wildcats, but it was so far removed from my reality that it just didn't even factor in. I would venture to say there are a lot of students in that situation right now."

Soto’s focus as a researcher and lecturer in SNRE is to analyze the economic aspects of the interactions between humans and nature.

"In very simple terms, I use a Venn diagram: There are two circles that overlap, one is humans and the other is nature," Soto says. "That intersection is where I currently reside in my job."

'Ambos Nogales'

Soto hails from an area known as "Ambos Nogales," which refers to the border towns of Nogales, Arizona — the town about 60 miles south of Tucson — and Nogales, Sonora. He was born in Nogales, Sonora, but went to middle and high school on the Arizona side, and now has dual U.S. and Mexico citizenship.
His mother, Teresa Leal, made sure Soto and six sisters and one brother developed bilingual skills from an early age by speaking both English and Spanish and placing stickers around the house so they would learn the names of common objects. His father, José A. Soto, drove a cab in Nogales, Arizona.

Soto's 92-year-old grandmother, Isabel Leal, is a beloved figure along the Nogales border, known for delivering tortas and clothes to migrant workers almost every day for the past 30 years.

"It's a border culture, a border identity, and when I go there, I feel very at home," Soto says.

Despite his close-knit family and affection for life in Nogales, Soto knew by the time he was a senior in high school that he'd have to leave home to find a career outside of the Bashas' now Food City where he worked bagging groceries, or one of the local produce distribution facilities, known as tomateras.

Soto discovered the Fred G. Acosta Job Corps Center on a school visit to Tucson. The center supports the U.S. Department of Labor's Job Corps program, which provides free career and academic training to people between the ages of 16 and 24. Through the program, Soto completed a three-month certified nursing assistant training course the summer after high school graduation. The experience of working inspired him to enroll at Pima Community College.

Soto was accepted to the UA after two years at Pima. It was almost like starting over. Like many first-generation students, he often felt overwhelmed. He explored a wide range of majors from astronomy and physics to English and political science.

Then, Soto reconnected with a UA economics professor who had been doing a study on the Job Corps program several years earlier. The more Soto thought about economics, the more it made sense, especially if he could focus on its intersection with natural resources.

"I remember as a kid in Nogales eating some of the acorns from the nogal tree, which the town is named for, and over the years, because of development that didn't prioritize natural resources, all of a sudden you didn't see any more of the trees," Soto says. "It was very interesting to me, seeing that urban landscape changing so much."

Nancy G. Rodriguez-Lorta, senior director of advising and student services at CALS, says first-generation students face common hurdles, including fear of the unknown, financial concerns, and even stress from breaking with family tradition by choosing higher education.

To help these students succeed, the UA offers several programs. First Cats serves students across the University, and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences offers CALS First Cats. New this fall is CALS AEMS, a program for freshmen, transfer students, first-generation students and students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in STEM fields.

CALS First Cats brings first-generation students together at social events early in the fall to help them start building connections with faculty, staff and peers.

"As a first-generation student myself, this topic is very near and dear to me," Rodriguez-Lorta says. "I recall feeling lost when I first started at the UA, and thanks to connections and mentorships I gained throughout the years, I kept on going. Reminding students to embrace
all experiences and familiarize themselves with what is available to them is key in obtaining a well-rounded educational experience."

'Mijito, when are you going to come back?'

Soto met Maria Teresa Velez, former associate dean of the Graduate College, at a UA Hispanic Alumni banquet while he was working on his bachelor's degree. Velez, who died in 2016, was a longtime advocate for minority students. Soto was seated next to her at the event, and she made the most of the opportunity.

"She asked me, 'Who are you? What are you studying?' and 'Are you going to grad school?'" Soto recalls with a laugh. "I told her I was considering it, looking at my options. She said, 'No, you have to go to grad school.' And she took out her planner right there and scheduled a meeting with me."

Her encouragement convinced Soto to pursue his master's degree. "It was another one of those pivotal moments," he says. Soto chose agricultural and resource economics, a perfect fit for his interests.

Soto emerged from his doctoral program as an expert in the relatively new field of coupled natural-human systems. One of his research projects concerned the endangered Florida panther and looked at ways to create effective programs that would preserve habitat and help the species recover while also protecting the interests of private landowners and ranchers.

It was a gratifying time for him, but there was always a strong pull to return to Arizona.

"I visited home every winter," Soto says. "I remember my grandma (Isabel). She always asked me, 'Mijito, when are you going to come back?'"

Soto's background in natural resource economics will enhance the work already being done by David Breshears, Regents' Professor of Natural Resources, and Laura López-Hoffman, associate professor of natural resources and the environment, says SNRE Associate Director Stuart Marsh.

"We're really excited to have him as a colleague," Marsh says. "He re-defines our capabilities in this really important realm of nature and man. And personally, it makes me happy to see the smile on his face because he really likes where he is."

Soto agrees.

"In academia, we sometimes call it the 'unicorn job,' because it's the job you'd most like to have," he says. "The University of Arizona was ideal for me; it was a place I really wanted to come back to."

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