

# *Sooner Nation*


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For OU's Lisa Morales,  
inclusion is not  
a buzzword;  
it's a way of life.

BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI





**G**ETTING LISA MORALES TO TALK ABOUT HERSELF IS NO EASY FEAT. Getting her to talk about diversity and inclusion initiatives and her job as director of Multicultural Engineering Programs at the University of Oklahoma Gallogly College of Engineering—that's easy.

A Norman native, Morales earned a bachelor of arts degree in education from OU, joined the Peace Corps and spent two years in Paraguay. Upon her return, she taught public school on the south side of Oklahoma City, where most of her students were Hispanic. Then came an opportunity to return to OU to work in Recruitment Services. A position in Diversity Enrichment Programs followed, where she connected with the College of Engineering's Multicultural Engineering Program.

As program director since 2010, her job is to facilitate the college's efforts in the outreach, recruitment, retention and overall success of underrepresented populations, including African American, Native American, Hispanic, female, first-generation college students and students with disabilities. The diversity programs, now called diversity and inclusion, also support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer students.

During the academic year, Morales and assistant director Tafara Cameron serve as mentors to the 180 students who receive MEP scholarships.

"We're not academic or financial aid advisers and we're not counselors, but these are all topics that we touch on with our students. We make sure they have everything they need," Morales explains. "Our office offers a family away from their families, so we really know our students well. We meet many of them and their families prior to freshman year, and we're with them until they graduate."

On the last Monday of every month, Morales' students and staff gather for food and fellowship.

"There are a lot of majors in engineering, so the monthly event gives us all a chance to get together," says Morales. "We invite industry representatives or recruiters to come talk about their companies and share their own stories."

Morales also organizes a spring break trip for freshmen and sophomores to visit corporate supporters in Dallas and Houston and oversees a mentoring program through which upperclassmen are matched with incoming freshmen and transfer students. "We want all of our students to be inspired and know that they *can* succeed if they work hard and make the right connections," she says.

Chemical engineering junior Ramiro Briguera is a perfect example of MEP's success.

"With the help of MEP, I started my engineering academic career with an on-campus family," he says. "The sense of community that MEP has provided for me since day one is the reason I am still at OU pursuing an engineering degree."

Morales rarely slows down, even during the summer, when the AT&T Summer Bridge program is in full swing. The four-week program for admitted incoming engineering freshmen immerses students in the rigors of the engineering curriculum to ensure they are prepared to hit the ground running when they begin classes the following fall. Forty-four students comprised the 2015 class.

"Math is the foundation of the AT&T Summer Bridge program. We want to ensure that students have the knowledge and confidence to go into calculus," Morales explains. "We work closely with the College of Arts and Sciences to provide for-credit math courses every weekday morning."

Summer Bridge students wrap up Mondays through Thursdays with a two-hour, post-dinner study hall led by counselors who are current MEP engineering students living with their younger counterparts in the residence halls for the entire four weeks. Many are former campers. "They are the teaching assistants, the resident advisers, the 'everything,'" Morales says.

Summer Bridge weekend activities range from movies, scavenger hunts and baseball games to professional development seminars on time management, resume writing, interviewing and career fairs.

Briguera, an MEP camper who became a counselor, concurs. "Summer Bridge played a pivotal role in my transition from a small rural high school to the top university in Oklahoma and showed me the whole spectrum of what college can be," he adds.

Morales stresses that while the Summer Bridge is rigorous and academically focused, there are many other benefits that prepare students for their "official" fall arrival at OU.

"I think the retention is so high for these cohorts because of the strong friendships and bonds they make," she muses. "From day one of the fall semester, they already have study groups, they have friends in classes of 200 or 300 students. These are friends they make for life."

Morales, too, makes friends for life.

"When former students come by, call or text, I'm reassured that I'm in the right place," Morales adds. "MEP can't take all of the credit for why they got through, but when they say thank you and that they're going to give back to MEP, I know we've had a positive impact on their lives."

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