

Promoting Diversity and Encouraging New Generations

In its aim to promote diversity in the agency and encourage university level students to pursue STEM careers (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), the US Forest Service Air Program recruits interns from different parts of the country through the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU.)



Maria along with other HACU interns kayaking at Potomac River, Washington, DC

Maria Ibarra Rodriguez was born in Mexico, and at the age of 8, she migrated to the United States. Most of her time in the US, Maria has lived in Rio Grande City, a small town of 14,000 inhabitants near the US-Mexico border. As an immigrant child, Maria had to learn English. Although Maria was only raised by her mother, she received the encouragement and support needed to graduate from high school, becoming the first person in her family to accomplish it. “My mom only had the opportunity to study up to 6th grade, but she always highlighted the importance of having an education.”

When Maria was in her senior year of high school, she remembers people talking about going to college, which motivated her to further her education. She was accepted to University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley.



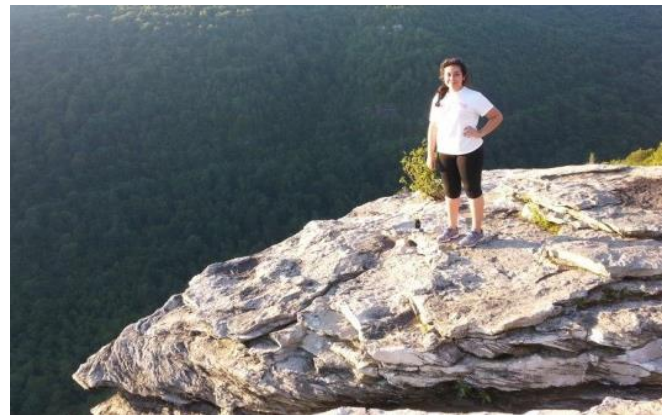
Maria talking to other youth about her experience being a student at the Best Practices for Student Success Conference

However, after two years of college, and doing community service, Maria realized that she did not want to be an engineer, but an environmental scientist, working in the protection of the environment.

After being certain of her career interests and goals, Maria applied to HACU, hoping to expand her knowledge interning in a government agency. However, she did not think she could get accepted in such a competitive program. “It was the beginning of the summer, and I found a very good job in my town. I was not expecting to hear from them, and on a Monday afternoon, Linda Geiser called me and asked me if I was available for an interview. Five days later, I was in DC.”

Maria interned with the Forest Service air quality conducting work with the database and lichenologists, botanists, and air specialists who perform the field work to add new data to the existing database from the 2013-2014 field seasons. She also did quality assurance checks of the existing data. “I did not know about all the work that the Forest Service does around the country. Some of the methods were very new to me; for instance, using lichens to monitor air quality.”

One of the challenges of her experience, Maria said, was to get adjusted to Washington, DC. “Coming from a small town where the life-style is very slow, it took me several weeks to get used to it. The diversity in



“Where I live in Texas we don’t have forested areas so I didn’t know anything about forests —working for the Forest Service I got a chance to visit a national forest for the first time.”

DC was also a cultural shock for me.”

On her return to Texas, Maria has continued to serve as a mentor for other students, encouraging and sharing with them about the opportunities that are available for them. She also talks to students about the importance of science and the work that the Forest Service does in protecting the environment.