Between them, a group of Mission College instructors hold multiple degrees in higher education. But they share another common link: If it were not for community college, they might not be where they are today.

Several full-time and adjunct instructors recently described for Our Mission their diverse life experiences, all of which led to community college as the first step toward careers as educators.

“College was never mentioned to me when I was in high school and I never really thought about it,” said Myriam Mekelburg, Mission College social sciences chair. “When I graduated from (Grant) high school, I just went across the street to Valley like everybody else.”

But the family was struggling economically. Mekelburg quit college and worked in blue-collar jobs for the next five years. A steady paycheck from Blockbuster Video made a lot more sense than college, she said.

Rodolfo Casarez was similarly motivated.

“I made great money as an auto mechanic,” said Casarez, speech instructor, explaining why he quit Mission College after a few weeks in 1991. Casarez was an admittedly poor high school student, frequently “locked out” of campus due to tardiness. He ultimately earned his G.E.D. at North Valley Occupational Center, where he also developed his mechanic skills.

Between them, Mekelburg and Casarez illustrate some of the factors that explain why a...
Instructors See direct path from high school to university doesn’t work for all students: Seventeen-year-old may lack academic preparation, focus, or maturity; or economic need drives them straight into the workforce.

For Melchior, already suffering from work exhaustion at age 22, enrolling at Valley College in search of something better made more sense than it had five years before: She thrived academically and in a program working with youth – an experience that confirmed her sociology was her field. Within six years, she had earned three degrees, including a Master’s in sociology.

Even as a well-paid mechanic, Casarez chafed at seeing discrimination directed against family members and Latinos in general. He longed for a platform to address these issues, and ultimately decided to become a teacher by returning to Mission College, five years after dropping out.

“I had to take several developmental classes before I could bring my English and math up to college level,” he said. It took him six years to earn enough credits for transfer to CSUN, but within six more years, he had earned a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in Chicano Studies and a second Master’s in Communication Studies.

“Mission College set me on the path to where I am today,” said Casarez.

Nuria Dorsey said her husband almost “smacked up on me.”

Dorsey won a basketball scholarship to CSUN right out of high school. Deep inside, he dreamed that he might someday play NBA ball. But things didn’t work out that way.

“I just had no idea what college was all about,” he recalled, describing a difficult first-year experience. He left CSUN, and over the next few years, he attended several community colleges, enrolling for a year or just taking a class here and there. In 1993, he saw an opportunity to play for College of the Canyons, which he attended from 1993-95.

“One day a counselor told me, ‘You know, you’ve got enough credits to transfer! I totally surprised me!’” he said. “That’s the moral of my story: if you just stay in play, you can get there.”

Dorsey enrolled at the University of La Verne, where he earned a Bacheror’s, Master’s, and ELD between 1999-2005. In addition to teaching business at LAMC, Dorsey now also teaches full-time at CSUN and part-time at Pierce College.

Speech instructor Margie Long was an eager first-year college student in Wisconsin when her father took ill. His medical care required Long and her siblings to quit school and work. Soon, Long married and was raising a family. Only after her three children were mostly grown and settled in their own education paths did Long return to school at Spokane Community College – 22 years after first enrolling in college.

“I was always going to get my degree,” she recalled. “I didn’t care if I was 60 when I did it. Through all those years, I never lost my love for learning.”

Now Long admits to a special fondness for “re-entry” students: individuals like herself who returned to college later in life.

Sociology has made great strides in breaking through the glass ceiling. Women who once wanted to be doctors and lawyers. But you might say that Annjanette Burks (right in photo) wants to break through that barrier with a battering ram SWAT team member. Burks and Mission College classmate Darlene Simon are each recipients of a $1,500 scholarship from the Los Angeles Police Foundation.

The scholarships go to Administration of Justice students who are planning careers in law enforcement. “I’ve just always dreamed of being a SWAT officer,” said Burks, whose uncle is a sheriff’s deputy and aunt a former police officer. Simon similarly has two uncles who are law enforcement officers in Argentina. Both students plan to earn degrees in A.S. in their major and then apply for the Los Angeles police or sheriff’s officer training academies.

In some cases, it wasn’t lack of focus, poor academic preparation, or even economic need that diverted our instructors. Life simply interfered. For Mekelburg, already suffering from work exhaustion at age 22, enrolling at Valley College didn’t make sense.

“By then, my high school class had graduated,” she recalled. “I didn’t want to go back there and I couldn’t go to university because I didn’t have a diploma.”

Bernal got back on track as a middle-aged woman where she earned an AA in business before earning a Bachelor’s in business management at Pepperdine University and an MBA at Woodbury University in 1998. In 1999, he turned out for Berkeley.

“There were too many other things I wanted to do,” she said. “I ended up going back to high school.”

Los Angeles City College turned out to be a great alternative. Within two years, he had enough units to transfer to CSUSM, where he earned Bachelor’s degrees in psychology and math. After 12 years in the private sector, Smazenka earned his doctorate in mathematics at USC and came to Mission College as an instructor in 1997.

The instructors who spoke to Our Mission said they feel a connection to community college students, in large part because they were “there” themselves.

“Mission College was my first teaching assignment (01) and it prefer it here,” said business instructor Dorsey. “Community college really gives you a chance to make an impact on students, just like it did for me.”

“We’re Honored… The Community College Public Relations Organization (CCPRO) has singled out the Our Mission newsletter for recognition in awards handed out last month. Our Mission took third place award in the internal newsletter category, winning praise for its quality of writing and use of photos and graphics. The newsletter is edited by Eduardo Pardo (public relations), with design and photography by Leonard Baptista (graphic arts). CCORP is an organization of public relations specialists representing California’s 109 community colleges.

Scholarships Mark Path to Law Enforcement

Joining a Statewide Effort

New Face in the Dugout

In seven seasons as the baseball coach at Cleveland High School, Joe Cascano’s teams won 20 or more games six times. They won it all – the City Championship – in 2002. Now Cascano brings his talent, experience and expertise to the Los Angeles Police Department as an instructor in the Police Academy.

“I accept the award, not for myself, but in the name of every member of our college community.”

The Economic Alliance Honored several reasons for honoring Moreno. The alliance said Moreno’s leadership led to a dramatic enrollment increase at Mission College. The group credited Moreno’s philosophy that the college should be the educational center of the community. He was lauded for committing to remove educational barriers for those who need secondary education most.

The alliance praised President Moreno’s policy of “reaching into the community” to bring education to those who cannot come to the campus, noting his plans to establish a community education center to serve that need.

The alliance pointed out that President Moreno also guided the campus Accreditation Team to a successful completion of their task. Moreno said the real credit should go to Team members who worked hard to finish the project.

“Has been a very satisfying year,” Moreno said. “I have been extremely pleased with the excellent faculty and staff of the college. I am eager to continue with our unified efforts in moving Mission College forward next year.”

God Showing in Vegas, Baby!

A Mission College teammate famously termed the bacon-novelty from the Las Vegas Culinary Challenge. The event, sponsored by the American Culinary Federation, saw five LAMC team members win medals. Left to right in photo, student Lauren Bergher won a bronze medal for her celebration cake; instructor Jesus Sanchez took a silver medal in the hot food category; Connie Vasquez captured a silver medal (and "best in show" acknowledgement) for her wedding cake. Da vid Gutierrez walked away with two bronze medals in the hot and cold food categories; and Christina Beltran (not pictured) won a silver medal for her novelty cake.
Inside this issue of Our Mission...

Grads Get Ready for the Big Day
More than 400 degree candidates, their relatives, friends and others will gather on the Mission College Quad for the 32nd annual Commencement on June 5. See Opposite Page

They Know Their Students Well
Several Mission College instructors know well the obstacles that community college students face - they confronted the same hurdles themselves.

LAMC's New Parking Structure
Nearly Ready
Mission College is ready to unveil its $20 million parking structure - so modern, it practically tells you where to park!

How Eddie’s Odyssey Began
Mission College English instructor John Orozco introduced us to Eddie Delano in his 1999 novel. Now Orozco tells us how it all began in a “prequel” to that book.

See These Stories And More Inside...

Our Mission Is Your Success

Editor: Eduardo Pardo   Graphic Design/Photography: Leonard Baptiste

Missions College Commencement on June 5
400 Graduation candidates will don cap and gown

The strains of Pomp and Circumstance will echo throughout Sylmar on June 5 when Mission College holds its 32nd annual Commencement Ceremony on the Quad.

That is, if cheering graduates, their friends and relatives don’t drown out the music! As many as 2,000 people are expected for the ceremony - including the graduates, their guests, faculty and other visitors.

The class of 2007 includes
402 degree candidates, 63 percent of them women.
The ages of the graduates range from 15 to 74, with 25 being the median age. The class valedictorian is Jose Luis Ramirez; Jody Coté is the salutatorian.

Both Ramirez and Coté have perfect 4.0 grade point averages. The Valedictorian, who began at Mission College as a 16-year-old high school student, is a candidate for three associate degrees - in Liberal Arts, Mathematics and Chicano Studies.

Ramirez, 20, whose father is a counselor at Mission College, believes at least eight family members have attended LAMC.

“I’m just the latest in a long line,” said Ramirez, who has been admitted to UCLA and is awaiting word from USC.

Manuel, 24, tried some college classes after high school, but economic need drove her into the workforce. More than 30 years later, she learned she could take classes online and continue working as she did, as a legal secretary. Now she’s about to earn an Associate degree in Paralegal Studies and hopes to find work as a paralegal.

“Getting a degree at my age is more special than anything,” she said. “I’ve wanted it since high school.”

This class, as a whole, has done well in the classroom. The average GPA is 3.04. More than half the class members are earning Associate of Arts degrees in Interdisciplinary Studies or Liberal Arts, two fields which give students many options when they transfer to a four-year college or university.

The 2007 Commencement Keynote Speaker will be Yvonne Chan, Ed.D., principal of the Vaughn Learning Center in San Fernando.

The ceremony will begin at 5 p.m. Due to construction of Mission College’s new parking structure, there is limited parking for Commencement at the campus. Guests are encouraged to park in the temporary student parking lot at Sayre Street just north of the 210 Freeway and ride the free shuttle bus to campus. Shuttle bus service will begin at 3:30 p.m.