UNI-CUE program, HCC help student achieve his dream

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Recent Hawkeye Community College graduate Jose Velasco got assistance from UNI-CUE's Educational Opportunity Center in returning to school.

BRANDON POLLOCK, COURIER STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

WATERLOO — Like many students, money was tight for Jose Velasco when he first enrolled at Hawkeye Community College.

In the case of the Mexican immigrant, though, issues of poverty were compounded by a lack of documents to work legally in the U.S. That held him back for years after he started college in 2001. Eventually, though, he gained legal status and then became a citizen.

Now 38, Velasco graduated from Hawkeye in May and has been hired as public safety officer for the city of Cedar Falls starting next month.
“For me, it was like a dream come true,” he said, about getting the job. Velasco and his siblings arrived in the U.S. in 1990. Their father brought them to California, where he was working legally, after their mother abandoned them in Mexico.

“I came when I was 11 years old,” he said. “My dad applied for residency.” Velasco hadn’t achieved residency status — and the right to work — by the age of 18 and had to reapply. He was still without legal documents when he graduated from high school in 1998 and came to Iowa.

“When I got out of school, a friend of mine invited me to come here and work,” he said. Velasco settled in Waterloo, but still didn’t have the proper documents by the time he enrolled at Hawkeye three years later.

“I had to drop (classes) a couple times because of financial situations and legal problems, because of my immigration (status),” he said.

When his dad started having health problems, Velasco again set his education aside. Once his dad’s health stabilized and Velasco became a legal resident of the U.S., he got a job at the Target Distribution Center in Cedar Falls. After years of working there, though, he was ready for something else and looked again to college.

He ended up at the University of Northern Iowa’s Center for Urban Education. Velasco received assistance in returning to Hawkeye through UNI-CUE’s Educational Opportunity Center. He learned about financial aid through the center’s staff, who helped him apply for it.

During his earlier time in college, Velasco had hoped to eventually earn a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. Now he was focused on enrolling in a major where he could help the community in a different way.

“I thought about it, (and) one of the best ways I can help people is to become a police officer,” he said. That goal was made possible last October when he became a U.S. citizen.

Velasco enrolled at Hawkeye two years ago and earned a criminal justice degree plus the additional liberal arts credits so he can transfer to a four-year university. After getting hired as a Cedar Falls public safety officer, where he will work in both a law enforcement and firefighting capacity, Velasco is putting a bachelor’s degree on hold for the next year. That will allow him to go through law enforcement academy training this fall.
“They strongly recommend I continue my education,” said Velasco. “I want to get a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. I’m just ready to make a difference in the community as a police officer and fire fighter.”

Velasco’s father and siblings initially followed him to Iowa, but only one brother is still here. His sister lives in Chicago and while his father and other brother are back in California. His progress is an inspiration to them and their families.

“I was the first generation in my family to graduate from college,” he said. “My nephews are very proud of what I’ve accomplished. They want to be police officers when they grow up.”