The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Jacqueline Aviña Espinoza struggled to learn English as a child. By middle school, she earned a spot in the federally funded Upward Bound program preparing her for high school and college.

Aviña Espinoza entered Sacramento State as an honors student, the first in her family to attend a four-year university. She considered becoming a nurse until a child development class changed her mind. “I realized I wanted to work in education because everyone deserves access to an education,” she said.

When Aviña Espinoza was accepted into Sacramento State, she was also accepted into the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) that helps students from farmworker backgrounds, as well as the University’s Educational Opportunity Program. Her commitment to equity in education grew from her own experience.

She worked on a professor’s research project that examined the experiences of undocumented youth. She returned to CAMP as a peer adviser; and as a volunteer for the nonprofit Student Action with Farmworkers, she traveled across the country to conduct outreach to farmworker families and offered support to English learners.

Mentors were crucial to her success, helping Aviña Espinoza through the daily struggles of a college student. “They helped me navigate study habits, internships and jobs, interview techniques, looking into graduate school, amongst so much more.” And her hard work paid off.

Aviña Espinoza made the Dean’s Honor List every semester and earned numerous scholarships, including endowments like the Anthony J. Leones and the Edward W. Ermet scholarships at Sacramento State.

“I remember when I struggled in school, receiving a scholarship was empowering. I was not only receiving monetary support,“ she explained, “but being reassured that my dreams, aspirations, and future were valuable.”

With her record of achievement, Aviña Espinoza was chosen by the College of Education as its Dean’s Award recipient, one of seven students honored as top graduates in 2020.

She returned home to the Napa Valley amid the pandemic, devoting time to what she calls her passion project to pay it forward. She’s creating online presentations in English and Spanish to help students and their families prepare for college.

“I want to serve underrepresented students, help them grow academically as well as professionally and personally,” she said. “If I help someone through my own struggles, then it was worth it.”