

First Generation College Graduate Cuts Own Path to Business Ownership

Ramon Flores enrolled in the College of Sequoias (COS) Ornamental Horticulture/Landscape Management program when he was 30 years old. Previously, he was employed in several different industries and after working for a small business, caught the entrepreneurial bug. Despite financial and other challenges, this first-generation college student earned an Associate of Science (AS) degree with a 3.77 grade point

average (GPA), making the president's list. After graduation, Flores opened a landscape business that supports his family, enjoys a flexible work schedule and is proudly watching his daughter pursue higher education at COS.

While Flores was growing up, his family moved frequently from state to state, interrupting his education. Despite those academic obstacles, he earned his high school diploma from Visalia Adult School. At San Joaquin Valley College, he completed a certificate in Industrial Technology and found employment as a quality inspector with a pistachio processor. Flores discovered that he didn't have a passion for this career and started exploring options.

When Flores began working with his Pastor, who operated a window cleaning business, he became intrigued with the idea of starting his own business. "My Pastor encouraged me to pray and find out what God wanted me to do," said Flores. "I recalled being in elementary school and how much I enjoyed cutting lawns for \$5 each. I had an amazing vision of working outside, caring for trees and landscaping. I am so grateful to my Pastor who pushed me forward, showed me how to run a business and continues to be a mentor."

The next step was to enroll in the COS Ornamental Horticulture/Landscape Management program. "From the beginning, I strived toward earning an AS degree," said Flores. "Fernando Fernandez was my main professor, and his hands-on teaching style really worked for me. We studied in the classroom, worked in the lab and then practiced what we'd learned on plants in the campus landscaping. I appreciated how he always answered my questions and to this day, he is one of my mentors."

COS offers Landscape Management and Ornamental Horticulture Associate of Science degrees as well as Certificates of Achievement in Landscape Design, Landscape Management and Ornamental Horticulture, explained Fernandez. There are also skills certificates available in Floral Technology and Ornamental Horticulture – Retail Nursery. "Certificates prepare students to go straight into a job with opportunity for advancement," said Fernandez. "Earning a degree means more opportunity and higher pay. If students prepare for the Pest Control Advisor Exam, this is a fantastic career opportunity."



Ramon Flores, Owner of Omnipresent Landscaping LLC

Fernandez recalls Flores as a dedicated student who had life experience under his belt and came back to college focused on his future. "As a re-entry student, new to the COS Ornamental Horticulture program, Ramon was very reserved at first," said Fernandez. "It clicked when Ramon indicated that if I showed him how to do it, he would be able to do it. As a hands-on learner, the terminology and concepts were a challenge. He 'learned how to learn' so if he encountered a situation, he had the tools to research, figure it out and apply it to the task. Those tools serve him now as a business owner."

The college resources were also a tremendous help to Flores. **"I was 30 years old when I went back to college," said Flores. "My advice is that it is never too late to get a college education. You can't do it alone. When you face challenges, you have to seek out resources. Your professors can help you get where you need to be, if you ask for help."**

The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) and Student Support Center helped Flores succeed. "Scott Rodgers, COS Tulare Student Success Coordinator, met with me monthly to review my goals, grades and career plans," said Flores. "He kept me focused on what I needed to achieve. Through EOPS, I got a blueprint of the courses I needed to take and help in selecting classes. I also received tutoring assistance from the English as a Second Language (ESL) center, as well as math and writing labs. With all the support, I managed to earn a 3.77 GPA."

One of the challenges for returning students is how to support their families while they are enrolled. "COS offered scholarships and financial aid that really helped," said Flores. "Even though I was taking 14-18 units per semester, I still needed to work. For two years, I was able to work part-time as a student worker under Mr. Fernandez in the on-campus nursery and that also helped me apply what I was learning."

Flores also met with Cosmo Costales, CTE Career and Academic Success Coordinator. "Cosmo helped me to update my resume and practice answering interview questions," said Flores. "Cosmo also connected me with an orchard owner who needed a part-time worker. This second job helped support my family while I was going to school. My boss had over 30 years of ornamental horticulture experience and taught me so much about soil, plants and trees. I'm grateful for the knowledge he poured into me."

After graduating with an AS degree in Ornamental Horticulture/Landscape Management from COS in 2020, Flores worked as a groundskeeper at a shopping center. "I worked five days per week as a groundskeeper and on the other two days focused on my own business, Omnipresent Landscaping LLC," said Flores. "Those first few months were hard since I didn't have any days off. When my business grew, I was able to resign and concentrate on my business full-time."

Flores enjoys owning a landscape business. "It is fulfilling when I transform my clients' gardens and make them so beautiful that my customers enjoy being outside," said Flores. "I mow lawns, over seed grass, apply fertilizers, maintain irrigation, and do soil tests for pH and salt levels. My next goal is to become licensed as a C27 Landscaping Contractor so I can develop bigger projects."



According to Fernandez, there is great opportunity to become self-employed. "Having the horticulture knowledge and degree, sets our graduates apart," said Fernandez. "If they treat customers well, sustain high quality and offer excellent customer service, they'll earn referrals to new clients. Over time, they will have customers who will pay well for a beautiful

landscape and enjoyable outdoor space.”

One of the benefits of being a business owner is managing his own time, according to Flores. “Since I make the schedule, I can be there for my wife and family,” said Flores. “When they need support, I can provide it. I’m glad that I can attend my children’s activities and sports. And, I am so grateful for my wife’s help with the business; she is fantastic at handling the office paperwork.”

For students who go back to school, Flores recommends taking advantage of resources. “Don’t be afraid to ask questions or ask for help,” said Flores. “The instructors want to help you be successful. I still talk to Mr. Fernandez frequently and it is a blessing to have him as a mentor.”

Flores was serious about learning landscape management, according to Fernandez. “He did what I suggested to students -- be ready to learn, have the courage to ask questions, manage your time and be present when you attend lectures,” said Fernandez. “When you come to the lab, come prepared and ready to get your hands dirty. And take advantage of the campus resources. If you do these things, you’ll be ready for a successful career in landscape management when you graduate, like Ramon.”

Flores is proud of being a first-generation college graduate. “I broke the barrier,” said Flores. “Now my children plan to go to college. My daughter is studying at COS now and I’m challenging her to beat my GPA.”

