

INTERVIEW *Published November 24, 2025 • 14 minute read*

Interviews with Influencers: **Viviann Anguiano**

Romelo Wilson

Interviews with Influencers: Vивиann Anguiano



In this episode of Interviews with Influencers, Romelo Wilson (Education Communications Advisor) sat down with Vивиann Anguiano, Managing Director of Higher Education at Center for American Progress to explore the urgent challenges facing students today. Vивиann shares how her lived experience as a first-gen college student and American shaped her commitment to expanding college access and affordability, and she highlights how states and institutions can step up to support students during a period of federal uncertainty. She also reflects on the value of higher education in a shifting economy and what it will take to rebuild public confidence in the system.

Video Transcript

Romelo: Welcome back to Interviews with Influencers. I'm your host, Romelo Wilson, Education Communication Advisor at Third Way, and we're joined by Vivian Anguiano, Managing Director of Higher Education at the Center for American Progress. Vivian has spent nearly 15 years in government and advocacy roles advancing college access and affordability, including leading higher education policy at the White House, and shaping legislation in the U.S. Senate. She's also a first-

generation college graduate, bringing both personal and professional insight to the challenges students face today. Welcome, Vivian.

Viviann: Thanks, Romelo, for having me. Excited to be with you.

Romelo: Of course. Let's jump right in. So I want to kick things off with an icebreaker question. Outside of work, what's one thing that you're obsessed with right now?

Viviann: I am obsessed with traveling right now, which I feel very lucky to do. I've been to five countries this year, and I think it's really just helped me get perspective, not only on how I can best contribute to progress in this country, but also connecting with other people and cultures, which I think we could do a lot more of today and I think fundamentally is really needed for thinking about lasting transformational change. So I love traveling. I'm hoping to go to Japan next year.

Romelo: Awesome. What was your favorite country to travel to this year so far?

Viviann: Oh gosh. I couldn't pick one just because they all have amazing things about them. But I went to Vietnam, the Philippines, Mexico, Portugal, and Ireland. And they were all just fantastic.

Romelo: That's amazing. As someone that studied international studies and took a few cultural awareness classes, I'm definitely a fan of it all. Let's jump right in. So you spent your career shaping policies to expand college access and student success. What lessons from your own experience as a first-generation college student continue to guide your work?

Viviann: I love this question. I think too often we focus on the hard skills that students have and not necessarily the soft skills that they bring from their lived experience. One thing that I'm really focused on based on my own experience as a first gen student is affordability. It continues to be the primary driver of whether or not students can access college. It's also a main concern of the American people when it comes to higher education.

The purchasing power, for example, of the Pell Grant used to be a lot more than what it is today. It's the lowest it's ever been actually. You used to be able to spend your Pell Grant to cover 80% of your costs 50 years ago, and today it's 30%. That's really a driving principle for me in my work because I remember being a first gen student and worrying almost every semester whether or not I could re-enroll or complete. I think over the course of my career in serving first gen students, both at the policy level and directly in schools, it's something that continues to be the main barrier.

The other thing that I think I've also carried with me from being a first gen student is that when you're first gen, you have to be very resourceful and hardworking to figure everything out for yourself to effectively navigate systems and institutions that you haven't necessarily been a part of before. And I think that's served me very well as a skillset and has guided a lot of my work both in the Senate and in the White House.

And then I'd say the last thing here is that I'm a first gen college grad but I'm also a first-generation American. Both my parents are from Mexico and I think like many first-generation or mixed-status

households or immigrant households, you really learn to not give up and to have resilience. You also draw on the people before you who have sacrificed a lot for opportunity. And I think I've especially been drawing a lot on that for both motivation and inspiration to keep fighting for people.

Romelo: Awesome, I love that answer. You touched on accessibility, and I know that's been a conversation for a while, but it's shifting to completion as well. Students are able to access college, but are students able to complete college too? So leading into my next question, having worked at the local, state, and federal levels, what do you see as the biggest barriers students face in accessing and completing college today?

Viviann: Yeah, I mean, that's a great point. We've seen across federal, local, and state governments that there has been an increased focus on completion efforts because we have seen some improvements in enrollment historically, but we have also seen gaps in completion. And so it's really important for us to continue thinking about that question. When it comes to completion, at the federal level, we've established a Postsecondary Student Success Grant. It's a program that has, at least under the Biden Administration, increased. I think we'll see what happens with that fund moving forward.

But also drawing upon what is happening at the local level at institutions, evidence-based practices that are actually working is really important. For example, the CUNY ASAP program, which is the premier model of helping students complete their programs, is really about providing wraparound support services. And I think that's one thing that we can really think about, particularly in moments when there are funding restrictions. A lot of what students need is information and support. When institutions, community-based organizations, and policymakers think about how to have coordination and information sharing, it can actually have an impact on students.

The other main barrier is cost. And we've seen in public opinion research that cost continues to be the main barrier that students report to be the reason they are not enrolling, even if they are interested in enrolling in college.

Romelo: Yeah, definitely. And I know you're deep in the weeds of higher ed policy. So every week there's a new headline about the latest higher ed policy move. How do you think the significant staffing cuts at the Department of Education will impact students and families?

Viviann: Yes, there's a lot happening at the federal level. One thing to keep in mind, just to contextualize this question, is that the staffing cuts are part of a broader effort by this Administration, which has promised to abolish the Department of Education. That goes hand in hand with some of the federal government-wide efficiency efforts that this Administration has taken on.

And I think in large part this is going to have a very negative effect on students and families. Just recently, we saw an announcement that the White House made that there will be six interagency agreements made with other federal agencies to essentially outsource programs, program administration, and specific functionalities of the Department of Education. I think in a lot of ways

these acts are not only unlawful because the executive branch needs congressional approval to make such changes to the Department of Education, but I think it will also result ultimately in harm.

For example, there are a number of very critical program administration functionalities that the Department of Education has, and that requires knowing how to execute quality education programs, what students need to be successful, and outsourcing that kind of function to an agency that may not necessarily have that educational expertise will lead to programs having less impact than is desired at the federal level.

One example is the CCAMPIS program. This is a program that provides on-campus childcare support for parents who are enrolled in college. And one thing we know about student parents is that childcare is a main barrier to not only accessing a degree program but completing one.

And this program will be outsourced to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which of course has its own expertise and a lot of really great staff who have a lot of information about their subject matter, but may not necessarily understand the nuances of what it means to enroll in courses every semester in connection with the childcare needs you have and the on-campus institutional supports that happen on a college campus.

So that's an example of how I think these programs could potentially diminish in terms of their impact, and I think it is also just one step we've seen. I think this Administration has said there is more to come, especially for students with disabilities, which is even more concerning. So I think this is just one step that we're seeing today. And as you said, a lot more I think will come.

Romelo: Yeah, and in the wake of all these funding cuts and staffing shortages and just general federal chaos, you referenced some of the great programs that have been supported by previous administrations. But what do you think states and institutions can do now to fill in some of the gaps to better support students?

Viviann: Yeah, I think this is probably the most important question that a lot of folks in the policy space are thinking about because these impacts will have an effect on people today and in the near term. One thing that I think states can do is start to think about preparing their budgets to continue to support public higher education in their states. I think when there is federal chaos happening and diminished federal support to institutions of higher education, as well as to other sectors, if we see cuts in support to healthcare or other critical parts of state budgets, typically what we've seen historically at least is that higher education does tend to get cut at the state level in order to preserve funding for other essential sectors that are necessary for Americans.

And I think one thing states can do is look at their projections and think about how they might be able to have emergency responses when they see gaps coming from the federal level. I think another thing that localities, counties, states, colleges, and K to 12 schools can do is lean on their soft power, which is what I describe as being these institutions that are really important and when they communicate with each other, actually have a lot of power. So for example, we've seen some colleges

coordinate on information sharing with their states in order to better provide means-tested benefits in that state.

It's complicated, but I think that when there is coordination and a shared mission to deliver support to students, you can actually maximize impact. And then I think the last thing I would say here is that I think it's important for institutions and states to lean into their leadership. I think we're at a moment where higher education is having an existential moment. There's a lot of national conversation and policy trends that are going after higher education, which I think is highly dangerous. And I do think it takes a bit of courage to not accept that premise. We at CAP, you mentioned I'm at CAP now, recently put out an analysis as a response to Trump's compact on higher education, which is essentially a letter that was sent out to colleges throughout the country inviting them to have priority funding at the federal level in exchange for giving up academic freedom and what we argue are unconstitutional points around free speech.

And that analysis illustrated how agreeing to or signing on to that compact could put university presidents and administrators in legal jeopardy. And I think that took courage to say. And I think it is important. And we've seen many institutions largely decline that compact. And that's been very encouraging to see because it shows that education is still a value in this country and that those who implement and provide those services are willing to stand up for it.

Romelo: You touched on how the higher ed landscape is facing an existential crisis with public confidence in higher ed fluctuating. What do you see as the clearest ways to demonstrate its value to both students and society?

Viviann: Yeah, that's a great question. One thing that I think is essential and that I think is a policy question is how do we ensure that college programs are leading to the returns we would like to see and are relevant in a changing economy, especially a changing digital economy that will have AI in the future and what that means for jobs and the creation of good jobs.

So I think it's the responsibility of policymakers and elected officials to think about how to actually do that and move our higher education system toward one that is much more affordable. I think the decreases in some confidence that you see in higher education do have a lot to do with affordability. And I think this is a question that just can't be ignored any longer.

Even when you look at polling information where you see some declines in public confidence around higher education, you also see that folks still want an education. And I think that is very telling because it demonstrates that there is a necessity to address the problems in our higher education system and also an optimism around the returns that system can provide to folks. So I think we have to address really hard policy problems and we certainly have to make higher education more affordable for people in this country.

Romelo: Yeah, totally agree. And on that affordability note, it kind of just sparked another question in mind. There have been reports that tuition has been on a decline generally in the last decade, but the lack of transparency around the actual price of college rather than just the sticker price that students

see is causing confidence to decline. What do you envision colleges and institutions doing as a whole to push past that reputation or that stigma that students might have about college being too expensive?

Viviann: Yeah, I guess I would push back on the premise of this a bit because I think while we have seen stagnation and some small declines in cost, those costs relative to household budgets are still just too large. And I think we would be missing the forest for the trees if we tended to only focus on helping people understand what their costs are rather than actually bringing those costs down. And on the flip side, I do think it's very important. I think there's a lot of misconception about net price versus sticker price. And there is some fear that happens, especially in communities where their parents haven't gone to college or many people in their communities haven't gone to college, and there is this perception that it's simply too expensive. I don't think they're wrong. But I do think that having partnerships and information sharing and public campaigns around how it can be affordable is important.

For example, pathways at the community college level have been effective in many places. There are many four-year public flagships that have demonstrated strong economic mobility for students because they're relatively lower cost and are very high quality institutions that provide excellent programs. So I think it's a combination of those things. We have to address price and cost and we also need to think about how to communicate the value and the reality of what it means to have a college degree.

Romelo: Well, that was the last of my questions, and I want to again thank you for your time and your expertise. It was a very insightful conversation. I enjoyed having this conversation with you. It's been a pleasure to hear about your work and the importance of expanding college access and student success. So thank you again, Vivian.

Viviann: Thank you. Have a good one.

Also in this Series

NEXT: INTERVIEW

Interviews with Influencers: Dr. Sarah Reber

INTERVIEW

Interviews with Influencers: Dr. Constance Barnes

 **VIEW ALL 25**

