

NEWS RELEASE

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Graduate's long journey toward bachelor's degree ends at Dec. 18 commencement

Cruz-Lopez began her schooling in Puerto Rico more than 20 years ago

[Story Link](#)

Photos attached

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Menomonie, Wis. — As a student, Maria Cruz-Lopez has traveled a long and challenging path to becoming a college graduate, from Humacao, Puerto Rico, to Milwaukee to University of Wisconsin-Stout.

On Saturday, Dec. 18, she will celebrate the terminus of that path, covering 2,400 miles and lasting more than two decades, at UW-Stout's Johnson Fieldhouse. She proudly will receive a Bachelor of Science degree during one of three commencement ceremonies for 560 graduates.

"Personally, I am proud of the journey and how, when I look back, I see growth. I am not where I was mentally and emotionally when I started my bachelor's degree. Stout gave me confidence," she said.

Befitting one of the meanings of the word commencement, or to begin, Cruz-Lopez envisions not an end but a transition to a new direction in her life with her degree in [career, technical education and training](#).

The CTET online program, designed for working adults, educates students to teach in the field as well as how to train and retrain adult workers for critical workplace skills.

Cruz-Lopez intends to use her education to help others who face education and career challenges. She is an admissions navigator, serving "the diverse student community" at Milwaukee Area Technical College. She was promoted to the position while working on her degree.

She hopes to continue on her new career path and become a student adviser or career development coach.

“I feel prepared to serve my community in a larger capacity. Before my education at Stout, I was sort of in the shadows. Now I feel confident in taking on larger responsibilities while applying the knowledge acquired through the past few years,” she said.

Associate Professor Matt Simoneau, director of the CTET program, has no doubt that Cruz-Lopez will succeed.

She has been voted by program faculty as the CTET Outstanding Student of the Year.

“Maria has demonstrated tremendous growth and a deep understanding of career and technical education and its impact on students within the PK-12 system,” Simoneau said.

“She has leveraged her education for personal and professional growth at Milwaukee Area Technical College. She is a strong advocate for students and continues to exemplify what a UW-Stout graduate can accomplish,” he added.

Cruz-Lopez will be attending the 1 p.m. commencement for the College of Education, Hospitality, Health and Human Sciences with two of her best friends as guests. Her family, including her mother in Milwaukee and father in Puerto Rico, will be watching the livestream of the ceremony, available at the [commencement website](#).

“I am grateful for the support of my family, friends and co-workers who form my support system. They kept me grounded and motivated throughout this journey,” she said.

A 21-year journey

Not knowing any English or having been exposed to any culture other than Puerto Rican, Cruz-Lopez moved to Milwaukee in 2000 at age 21.

She had earned an associate degree in office systems administration from the University of Puerto Rico.

She started taking English as a second language courses at MATC. The experience led to a part-time job there for five years. Then she worked full time with Aurora Health Care for six years before returning to MATC for a full-time position in 2012.

Around 2015, a UW-Stout faculty member — possibly Simoneau — visited MATC to talk about the CTET program, and Cruz-Lopez attended.

“Completing a bachelor’s degree had been a long-time goal that I had put aside for lack of confidence and resources,” she said.

Finally overcoming her fears, Cruz-Lopez enrolled in the CTET program as a transfer student in 2018, with 12 of her credits transferring.

She had been hesitant to pursue the degree because she was unsure if her level of proficiency in English would be a barrier to learning. “However, that challenge disappeared the moment I started receiving instructors’ feedback and guidance,” she said.

Also, the financial burden she faced was eased greatly when she applied for and received five scholarships through the Stout University Foundation.

Cruz-Lopez cited professors such as Simoneau, Virginia Lea, Daniel Kovach, Debbie Stanislawski, Michael Critchfield and others who “were engaged and provided constructive feedback that made sense. They all left their mark. They were all great.

“The education I received at Stout has opened doors to infinite opportunities,” Cruz-Lopez added. “The possibilities for growth in the workplace are endless. Stout ignited in me the desire to continue learning and developing myself. A Stout education means moving forward and staying on course.”

UW-Stout is [Wisconsin's Polytechnic University](#), with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes.

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Photos

Maria Cruz-Lopez, a career, technical education and training graduate from UW-Stout, is an admissions navigator at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

Maria Cruz-Lopez, an online student from Milwaukee, visited UW-Stout in 2019 to receive a scholarship.

Matt Simoneau, associate professor and CTET program director