

# Wallace State Community College

## Student Success/Graduation Feature Stories: Enrique Castro

### ***Being Wally: First-Gen College Student Finds Confidence in a Costume***

If you've ever stepped foot on the Wallace State Community College campus, chances are you've seen Enrique Castro around. However, you might not immediately recognize his pleasant smile or friendly demeanor. And you may have remembered his head a bit bigger...

Likely, you'd know Castro better as Wallace State's beloved mascot, Wally. His lion-costumed likeness can be found almost everywhere across the Hanceville campus – from a mural in the student center, to course catalogs, cardboard cutouts, and social media content. Castro jokes, "I always say, 'I'm leaving this semester, but you'll have a hard time getting rid of me!'"

Beneath the felt, foam and fleece, though, the spirited student is more than just a beloved mascot. As a member of Phi Theta Kappa, a student on the President and Dean's list, and a WSCC "Student of The Year" recipient, Castro says the key to his academic and extracurricular success was a solid support system that stayed with him every step of the way.

"Wallace gives you that motivation to keep going and pursue your goals further," says Castro.

The opportunities Castro encountered at Wallace State, he says, not only laid a strong educational foundation for his future engineering career, but built up confidence to carry him through *life*.

As a first-generation college student, the pre-engineering student went into his initial semester at Wallace State unsure of what to expect.

"I had no idea what I needed, or what my plan should look like," Castro reflects. "I

wasn't used to having that independence of registering and choosing each class."

But Wallace State's resources and staff made Castro's transition into college almost *seamless*. With the help of his advisors, professors, and array of resources – like tutoring services, student success advising, and career readiness preparation – Castro was primed for the challenge.

"It feels like it's a new start at the beginning, but it doesn't feel overwhelming," he says. "It's a very close community, a friendly community ... and an inviting environment."

Before his days as Wally the Lion, Castro performed as his high school's mascot during his senior year. As fate would have it, though, it wasn't a passion for performance that would inspire him to become the school's symbolic character.

Rather, when his high school held auditions to find their next mascot, Castro says his classmates were less than enthused. "No one came to tryouts," he reminisces. "[My school] was like, 'we just need someone!'"

Once an introverted teen, the decision to audition as his high school's mascot ultimately arose from a dare by Castro's close friends.

"We all have that feeling senior year where you feel like you didn't do much," says Castro. "You're like 'I'm going to do more!'"

"That was my moment where I was like, 'I'll be the mascot!'"

Castro *flourished* in the role, eventually attracting the attention of Wallace State, which had well-timed plans to re-boot the college's mascot.

"They wanted to renovate the [mascot] program and bring someone to the table that can change what has been done," explains Castro.

In 2019, Wallace State retired “Roary,” and reverted back to its original lion mascot, Wally. The revamped pep-rep was voted on by students, and sported a new, athletic look.

When Wallace State recruited Castro, they were looking for someone to help make Wally a more active part of the campus’s culture.

“I really liked the idea of representing something that means so much to you,” says Castro. “So, I just kept going with it!”

His work as Wally has paid dividends. Thanks to the mascot program, Castro received a full scholarship to Wallace State Community College, and was enthused to find “an amazing opportunity” to afford the college experience.

“It’s like one of those stories that’s a dollar and a dream,” he muses. “It all started as a dare with my friends, and now it’s given me so much! Things I never would’ve imagined.”

Now, as Castro prepares for commencement, he is reflecting on his whirlwind gig as Wally and his educational accomplishments thus far. Castro believes his role as Wally helped him achieve more than just academic accolades. Bringing life to the iconic lion, he says, helped contribute to his personal growth and discover a more outgoing side of himself.

“I feel like that’s the most impactful thing ... is that set of communication skills, and that idea of coming out of my shell more,” explains Castro. “I don’t even talk [as Wally] ... so, it’s funny that it has helped me in that way, but it truly has.”

The lionhearted learner is currently weighing his options as he sets his sights toward a career in engineering. With his Wallace State foundation set, he hopes to enroll in the Architectural Engineering program at University of Alabama, Birmingham this fall.

As “Wally” leaves the lion behind, he’ll always look back at his alma mater with a

strong sense of pride.

“Wallace has given me so many opportunities,” beams Castro. “That’s what Wallace is here for – to help you achieve your success.”