

Your place for the best coverage of the fight-back in Wis!



**The Progressive**  
SINCE 1909

[Login](#) · [Subscribe](#)

Subscribers can log in and access digital editions and our archive.

## Here's what it takes to help disadvantaged students succeed

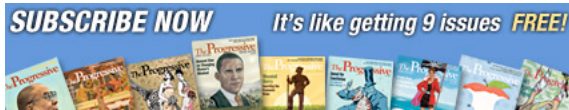
By *Alvaro Huerta*, April 28, 2011

It's getting close to graduation time, a good time to note how kids from America's barrios and ghettos can succeed in higher education.

Here is what it takes: not just great teachers but also government-funded college prep programs catered specifically to historically disadvantaged students.

I should know since I benefited from all three.

I grew up on welfare in a housing project in East L.A., and I am well aware of the problems that kids in the inner city confront on a daily basis. In addition to attending overcrowded public schools, they live in blighted environments plagued by abject poverty, institutional racism, low educational attainment levels, high gang activity and drug addiction, along with rampant police abuse.



In spite of these tremendous obstacles, my Mexican immigrant parents managed to send four of their eight children to elite universities. They insisted that we get a good education.

I also was lucky to have Ms. Cher as my elementary school teacher. She had hair like Lucille Ball, but a huge heart, and she helped foster my mathematical skills. And when I had exhausted the assigned sixth-grade math books, she went out of her way to teach me algebra. She also took me, along with other class members, on a field trip to her Big Bear cabin, providing us with a rare opportunity beyond the railroad tracks, freeways and polluting factories surrounding our neighborhood.

But high school was harder, especially English class. How in the world can a kid from the projects — who was only assigned one book, Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, and one two-page essay — compete with privileged kids from the suburbs?

Ultimately, I had to teach myself to read and write at a competitive level.

But I didn't do it all by myself — not by a long shot.

One pivotal experience I had was with Upward Bound — a summer, residential, college prep program for historically disadvantaged students. This gave me a path ahead that escaped most of my childhood friends.

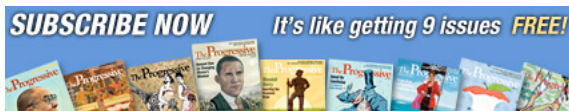
In addition, I was able to take courses at Occidental College during the summers of my high school years, which allowed me to gain my footing, as the teachers and staff created a rigorous and supportive academic environment for all of us.

There are millions of kids like me in the barrios and ghettos of America who have the capacity to succeed in college. Most of them did not have my good luck with my attentive parents, nurturing teachers, Upward Bound and college summer school. And most of them don't have the resources to go to college in this era of declining scholarships.

It's a crime to write these kids off. We must do more so that every kid in America has the opportunity to succeed academically.

**Alvaro Huerta** is a Ph.D. candidate in the University of California-Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning, and he is a Visiting Scholar at UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center. He can be reached at [pmproi@progressive.org](mailto:pmproi@progressive.org) (<mailto:pmproi@progressive.org>).

You can read more pieces from The Progressive Media Project [by clicking here](http://progressive.org/list/opeds). (<http://progressive.org/list/opeds>)



[Share / Save](#) [f](#) [t](#) [d](#)

[http://www.addtoany.com/share\\_save?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.progressive.org%2Fmhuerta042811.html&title=Here%E2%80%99s%20what%20it%20takes%20to%20help%20disadvantaged%20students%20succeed&descrip](http://www.addtoany.com/share_save?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.progressive.org%2Fmhuerta042811.html&title=Here%E2%80%99s%20what%20it%20takes%20to%20help%20disadvantaged%20students%20succeed&descrip)