

It takes more than a village ...

Alvaro Huerta

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It takes more than a village for youths from America's barrios and ghettos to attend elite universities. It also takes great teachers and government-funded, college-prep programs catered specifically to historically disadvantaged students. I know, because I benefited from both.

Growing up on welfare in a poor village - East Los

Angeles' Ramona Gardens housing project - I am well aware of the obstacles young people from the inner city confront on a daily basis. In addition to attending overcrowded public schools, these youths must cope with living in blighted environments plagued with abject poverty, institutional racism, low educational attainment levels, high gang activity and drug addiction, along with rampant police abuse.

Despite these tremendous obstacles, my Mexican immigrant parents managed to send four of their eight children to elite universities. In my case, if not for the support of my late parents, key teachers, college-prep programs and, today, my wife Antonia, I would not have received my bachelor's and master's degrees from UCLA, nor been accepted into a UC Berkeley Ph.D. program.

From Day One, I had to maneuver a broken public school system that put up roadblocks throughout my academic journey. Despite excelling in mathematics, for instance, when it came to reading and writing at the university level, the public school system - Los Angeles Unified School District - failed me.

How in the world can a kid from the projects, who was only assigned one book, John Steinbeck's "The Pearl," and one two-page essay in high school, compete with privileged kids from the suburbs? To compensate, as a math major at UCLA, I literally taught myself how to read and write at the university level to compete on equal terms with America's brightest students.

I've been very successful in my academic career, and I owe much of my scholarly accomplishments to key teachers and my participation in Upward Bound at Occidental College. While Ms. Cher at Murchison Elementary School motivated me in school, Upward Bound - a summer residential, college-prep program for historically disadvantaged students - provided me with a college-oriented path that escaped most of my childhood friends.

Always cheery, Ms. Cher, who had hair like actress Lucille Ball, helped foster my mathematical skills. Once I had exhausted the assigned sixth-grade math books, she took the extra time to teach me algebra using an old middle-school text. She also took me, along with other class members, on a field trip to her Big Bear cabin, providing us with a rare opportunity to see a world beyond the railroad tracks, freeways and polluting factories surrounding our neighborhood.



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Attending Oxy during the summers of my high school years allowed me to take college-prep courses not offered at my public high school. The college teachers and staff created a rigorous and supportive academic environment for us all to excel.

While by no means a scientific study, my story is an example of how it takes more than a village for someone from the inner city to attend elite universities like UCLA and UC Berkeley.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/04/25/EDTO1J60N5.DTL>

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