

The Daily Californian - From the ghetto to graduate studies



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By Alvaro Huerta

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Now that the application season has concluded for millions of students applying for undergraduate, graduate and professional schools, the acceptance notifications will loom over many of their heads

like dark clouds for the next few months. During this time, I will reflect on my improbable journey from inner-city public schools to advanced degrees from the best universities in the world. This includes a B.A. (history) and M.A. (urban planning) from UCLA in addition to a Ph.D. (city & regional planning) from UC Berkeley. By shedding light on my own story, I hope to encourage other students from America's barrios and ghettos to pursue higher education at elite universities.

While I have worked hard and sacrificed much over the years, I question the American notion that only "hard work" and "perseverance" lead to success. Too often, corporate-minded outsiders who never experienced poverty or attended overcrowded public schools preach to inner-city Latinos and African Americans about working hard, making the right choices and being accountable for their

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actions as the sole means to upward mobility.

While these virtues are necessary for inner-city students to succeed, policymakers, educators and civic leaders should address the root causes that produce educational inequality in the first place, such as a profit-oriented system that favors the affluent, inadequate public schools, low levels of educational attainment, low financial capital, lack of quality jobs, residential segregation and institutional racism. As the son of poor Mexican immigrants and a former resident of East Los Angeles's Ramona Gardens housing project, I, along with my seven siblings, grew up in a bleak environment impacted by these structural constraints.

While I do not pretend to have the answers to address the complex educational needs of America's disenfranchised youth, I can say that in my case, I benefited from several factors throughout my educational trajectory that helped me overcome tremendous obstacles. This includes the following five factors: specialized skills, luck, close-knit family, hard work and sacrifice.

Throughout my early years at Murchison Elementary School, I excelled in mathematics. While many inner-city kids hope to escape the mean streets via their athletic skills, my specialized skills revolved around algebraic equations, polynomials and word problems.

Thanks to my favorite teacher, Ms. Cher, who had hair like "I Love Lucy's" eponymous character, I mastered algebra in the sixth grade. Like my brother Salomon, a critically acclaimed painter who displayed great artistic abilities at an early age, my specialized math skills represented my ticket out of the projects, which were known as the Big Hazard projects for the local gang.

Luck also played a vital role in my academic career. While I bused to a majority-white middle school where I was tracked into wood shop and metal shop classes, I learned of a great college prep program at Lincoln High School. Thanks to my childhood friend Hector, I learned about Upward Bound at Occidental College — a federally funded college prep summer program for historically disenfranchised youth.

Hector, who also yearned to escape the projects, peer-pressured me into applying. Like many teenagers, I feared the unknown and felt overwhelmed by the personal statement, which I quickly disposed of out of frustration. Luckily for me, after Hector retrieved my crumpled, hand-written essay from the trash can and ironed it out, I reluctantly applied and was accepted. If not for Hector and Upward Bound, I don't think I would have been prepared for or accepted to UCLA as a freshman.

My close-knit family also provided me with unconditional support throughout my university studies. I especially recognize the wise Latinas in my family — my mother, four sisters and wife. Lacking formal education, my mother made my father take my brother and me (at 13 years of age) to work in Malibu as day laborers. This was done to give us a glimpse of life in the U.S. without a good education. Also, my brilliant wife, Antonia, who holds advanced degrees in education and economics, originally encouraged me to pursue my Ph.D. and academia, serving as a concrete example for our gifted son, Joaquin, to both emulate and surpass.

Finally, I acquired the virtues of hard work and sacrifice from my late parents. While my father,

Salomon Sr., first toiled as a farm worker under the Bracero Program — the U.S.-Mexico guest-worker program of the mid-20th century — he later worked as a janitor at a rim factory for decades, earning minimum wage. Meanwhile, my mother, Carmen — who first worked as a domestic worker in San Diego when our family lived in a Tijuana slum prior to migrating to the U.S. — spent 40 years of her life cleaning the homes of the affluent. Thanks to their hard work and sacrifice, along with the support of my wife Antonia, I overcame tremendous obstacles as a poor Chicano kid from the projects to become an urban planning scholar.

Alvaro Huerta is a UC Berkeley alumnus with a doctorate in city regional planning.