

Student faces some unique challenges

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a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 40 percent who start at a public university and 56 percent who start at a private university.

These are the odds Jonathan must beat to achieve his dream of becoming an architect. His success — and the success of students like him — is critical for the nation and in particular Texas, where Hispanics already make up more than half of all children in public K-12 schools.

"Unless we do a better job of increasing the educational attainment of Hispanics . . . we are not going to get where we need to get as a country, it's as simple as that," said William Bowen, former Princeton University president and a senior research associate at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Despite increases in college enrollment, Hispanics — especially men — lag behind other groups when it comes to earning the degree that makes it all worthwhile. In 2007, 13 percent of Hispanics over 25 held a bachelor's degree, compared with 19 percent of African Americans and 32 percent of Anglos, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Women are outpacing the men, earning 61 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanics.

Many Hispanic students, Jonathan among them, come to college unprepared for college work. Nearly half are the first in the family to go to college and most start their journey in public community colleges, which require a lot of self-motivation and don't offer the trappings of a "traditional" college experience.

"That just isn't an easy pathway for most," said Sarita Brown, president of Excelencia in Education, a Washington-based nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the educational success of Hispanics.

At many four-year universities, especially small, private colleges, students are more apt to stick around because they feel connected to the campus, Brown said.

At least Jonathan isn't saddled with the responsibilities many young Hispanics face, such as taking care of children or pitching in to the household income. He goes to school full time and works only 15 hours a week. Financial aid covers his tuition.

But Jonathan is well aware that the deck is stacked against him in other ways, and he is not interested in becoming a negative statistic.

"I don't want to be like that," Jonathan said. "No one is going to make you feel like you can't do anything just because you are Mexican. Take your own responsibility and achieve."

An average student

Jonathan was born in Coahuila, Mexico, in 1989. His parents, Heriberto and Lydia Piedra, immigrated to San Antonio in 1993.

Jonathan grew up in San Antonio and graduated from Jefferson High School last year. He still lives with his parents and his 17-year-old brother, Daniel, in a small house on the West Side.

Heriberto supervises a production line at BMC West, a millwork company in Helotes, and Lydia cleans houses. The family belongs to a Spanish-speaking Jehovah's Witnesses congregation, and spends their weekend mornings knocking on strangers' doors, hoping someone will listen to the story of Jesus Christ.

"We're a pretty happy family," Jonathan said. "We just go to church, we preach and we pray."

The family also helps build kingdom halls, or church buildings. Working on those projects inspired Jonathan to become an architect. He dreams of studying abroad in Italy and living in Europe one day.

"Architecture will help because we have to build other congregations around the world," Jonathan said. "That's what I want to study and that's what I want to do, help my community and my church."

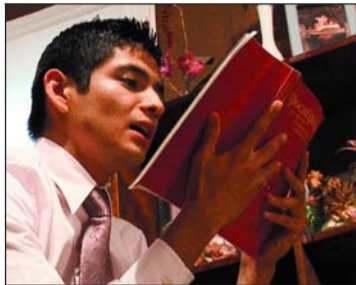
At Jefferson High School, Jonathan was an average student who played soccer and marched in the band. He didn't take any Advanced Placement classes, which are challenging classes that offer college credit if students can pass a national, end-of-course exam.

"School was basically just school for me," Jonathan said. "It was nothing special."

College was not on Jonathan's radar until his senior



Jonathan Piedra sits down to a meal with brother Daniel (left) and their mother, Lydia Piedra. Jonathan lives at home with his family, which includes his father, Heriberto. His parents talked him out of attending Baylor University in Waco because of the distance.



Jonathan reads a passage from a Jehovah's Witness Bible study book at a church meeting. Jonathan juggles his faith, his family and school.

year, when all the teachers started talking about it. Jonathan's parents dismissed his first choice destination, Baylor University, saying it was too far away. His second pick was the University of Texas at San Antonio.

But by that time, Jonathan already had ties — and the promise of a scholarship — at San Antonio College. During his senior year, Jonathan participated in a peer-tutoring program led by SAC that aims to recruit average students who may not otherwise go to college by offering them a \$1,000 scholarship.

"Finally, I decided to go to SAC because I guess it's cheaper," Jonathan said. "And it's good, the (architecture) program there."

Jonathan was clueless about applying for financial aid. Luckily, staff from a local nonprofit called Project STAY came to Jefferson and helped Jonathan and other students fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

Daniel Sustaita, a coordinator with the SAC peer-tutoring program, encouraged Jonathan to get a jump on college by taking remedial English and math over the summer. Jonathan also got a transfer plan outlining which classes he needed to transfer to UTSA's architecture program.

As Jonathan's first year comes to a close, he has so far earned a grade point average of 2.7. If he passes all his classes, he will have banked 18 hours toward his degree.

Math woes

Jonathan arrived on the SAC campus for his 7 a.m. math class one day last semester looking bleary-eyed, his Manchester United cap pulled down on his forehead. Outside, a white fingernail moon still hung in the pre-dawn sky.

The teacher, an energetic Asian woman with dark, cropped hair and glasses, wrote problems on the chalkboard and called on students to solve them.

"This is the easy stuff," she barked. "We are getting to the hard stuff today. Each day you come here you need to study for two hours. It's not going to be easy, right?"

Jonathan hunched over his desk and copied the problems in his small, neat handwriting. A cup of coffee on his desk went untouched.

This was Jonathan's second remedial math class at SAC. He would eventually fail it.

At Jefferson, Jonathan made it all the way through pre-calculus, but did so poorly on a math placement test at SAC that he must complete three semesters of remedial math be-

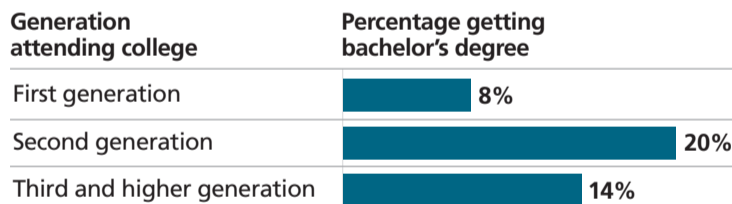


Jonathan Piedra (right) greets a friend on the SAC campus. Jonathan struggled with math in high school and now must take remedial courses without receiving credits. Statistics show Hispanics lag behind Anglos and Asians in taking high-level math courses in high school, putting them at a disadvantage in college.

Generational differences

For Hispanics, being the first generation in the family to go to college makes getting a bachelor's degree less likely.

■ Educational attainment in 2007 for Hispanics, ages 25 to 29

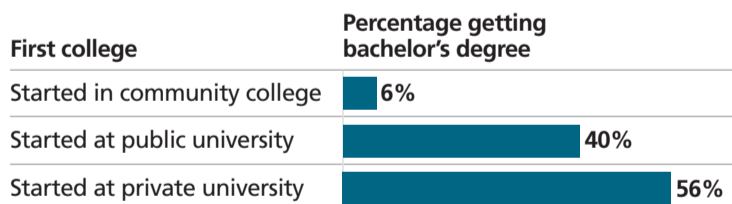


Source: Pew Hispanic Center

Starting-point differences

About 60 percent of Hispanic students start out in community college, which looks to be a relative disadvantage in getting a degree.

■ Hispanic students who completed degree in six years or less



Source: U.S. Department of Education

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fore moving on to college algebra. None of those credits counts toward his degree.

Jonathan said he doesn't like math, and admits to sliding by in high school by copying other students' answers. He can't do that in college.

"It's harder," he said. "My math level, I didn't know anything basically. I couldn't write four pages for an essay when I was in high school. Now I can."

Jonathan's high school experience cuts to the heart of why many Hispanic students are not graduating from college — poor academic preparation.

A long-term study by the U.S. Education Department found that taking difficult classes in high school, especially math, is perhaps the single biggest predictor of success in college. A student who takes calculus in high school is twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree as a student who takes algebra 2, the study showed.

But Hispanics and African Americans lag behind Anglos

kids do this in intermediate algebra? That will guarantee that they can move into the college curriculum without remediation."

Outside distractions

Jonathan blew off math his first semester, but he was clearly jazzed about his architecture classes, spending hours at a stretch sketching, crafting cut-paper designs and building a scale model of a modern beachfront home, inspired by a Japanese architect.

"At two or three in the morning, my wife would be yelling, 'Jonathan, go to bed. Jonathan, it's late,'" said Heriberto, Jonathan's father.

"I like doing it," Jonathan said.

His passion showed in his grades, an A and a B. One day last semester, Jonathan sat in his architectural graphics class, listening to a fellow student complain about making a D on her quiz.

"Reproduce crispness. He never said that," the girl protested.

"Yeah, he did," Jonathan said in his soft voice.

Another student leaned over to eyeball Jonathan's drawing. "How far did you get on the clock?"

"I finished it."

"Oh, man."

The student made a face and turned back to his work while the professor, Sam Luna, took roll. Only nine of 15 made it to class.

"Whenever you're absent, you're missing a lot of information," Luna warned.

Luna said at least three students will have dropped by the end of the semester, many of them put off by the time commitment architecture requires.

"They don't understand," Luna said, shaking his head. "Architecture isn't hard, but it is time consuming. Many of them work, they have families, some are in the military. It's hard."

Trying to juggle work, family and school is another reason why many Hispanic students don't finish college, said Brown, of Excelencia in Education. Many think they'll ease into

higher education by starting at a community college, but they end up getting distracted and dropping out, she said.

Even Jonathan, who has fewer distractions than many of his peers, puts church and family before school.

"Before everything comes going to church and doing what God wants," Jonathan said.

His mother, Lydia, holds tightly to Jonathan. She doesn't want him to move away for school, much less live in Europe someday.

"In the bottom of her heart, she knows he will go wherever he wants, but she doesn't like it," Heriberto said.

At four-year universities, especially private ones, students' lives typically revolve around going to school. They live, eat, play and work on or near campus. There are freshman orientation activities, faculty advisers, dormitories, fraternities and sororities and a host of student clubs and sports teams, all of which help keep kids engaged in school.

Jonathan typically drives to campus for class, hangs out a bit with his friends, then heads home or to work. Heriberto, at least, seems to have no illusions about the difference.

"In community college, it depends on you to take advantage of it," he said.

Focus on transfers

Unfortunately, many students get lost along the way. According to one long-term U.S. Education Department study, 37 percent of traditional-age students who started at a community college ended up transferring to a four-year university. Of those who transferred, 60 percent earned a bachelor's degree.

Some community colleges, the ones in San Antonio included, have begun taking a hard look at transfer and graduation rates. Alamo Community Colleges, which includes SAC, is part of a national initiative to raise community college success rates called Achieving the Dream, supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education.

In March, ACC trustees approved an incentive to offer fixed tuition for three years to students who stay enrolled continuously through the summer term. Studies show that momentum is key, and students who quit for a semester and try to come back hurt their chances for success.

Part of the difficulty for community colleges is the caliber of students, who are all over the map in terms of academic preparation, said Richard Fry, senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Center. The vast majority needs some sort of remedial education.

"I can be very critical of community colleges, but keep in mind they are ones really working with and trying to succeed with the students who face the greatest challenges," Fry said. "You want to recognize the difficulty of their mission."

One of ACC's Achieving the Dream goals is to revamp remedial math classes, which students like Jonathan routinely fail. They are also adding counseling for first-time college students and beefing up orientation courses.

Four-year universities also have a role to play. UTSA, for instance, is trying to smooth the pathway for students who want to transfer from ACC by drawing up transfer plans for different majors and guaranteeing transfer admission from local community colleges to students initially turned away from UTSA.

Earlier this month, the University of Texas System hired a vice chancellor for community college partnerships, a move that signaled a new focus on reaching out to transfer students.

"Community college transfers represent the low-hanging fruit in the higher education world," said Chancellor Mark Yudof. "We should be doing everything we can to make it easier for students to move on to four-year institutions."

As far as Jonathan is concerned, he likes SAC. He has lots of friends there and is focused on his goal of transferring to UTSA. The educational experts may worry about him graduating, but Heriberto keeps the faith.

"You need to trust them," Heriberto said of both his sons. "They have the right tools to do the right things. If you want to get something, you have to work. I passed that lesson to them. It's no secret."

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