**Juan Barrera: The Pathway to the Ivy League**

**Gaining Skills to Advance to the Ivy League**

As he led his fellow Master’s degree candidates in procession at their Harvard graduation ceremony in 2016, Juan Barrera paused for a moment and marveled at how far he had come. After all, it was only a few short years ago that he was turned down by every single college he applied to.

A native of Alamo, Barrera graduated from PSJA Memorial High School in 2005. By his own admission, “I was not ready for college, but I filled out the applications anyway because that’s what all my friends were doing. I saw countless brochures with college students laughing and enjoying themselves and thought, that could be me one day.” At the last minute, he realized he had to take a standardized test, so he nervously signed up for the ACT.

His rushed test-taking process resulted in low scores. “But I didn’t know that. No one explained to me what the score meant, or where I fell among my peers. I just submitted them with my applications.” One by one, the rejection letters rolled in.

Barrera faced a problem a lot of first-generation students face: not understanding the basic college admission process or how to prepare for it. “My parents were very supportive, but when it came to finding information, navigating the system, and even understanding what questions to ask, I was on my own,” he says.

**Turning to South Texas College**

Fortunately, Barrera knew of South Texas College and knew the school offered his only chance at higher education.

“My mom came with me to the financial aid office, and when the woman there found out I was 18, she asked my mom to step aside because I should be the one to answer questions and fill out paperwork. That was the best thing—I realized then that I had to grow up.”

Because Barrera failed to qualify for full financial aid, he had to get a job to cover tuition. “I figured if I was paying for school, I might as well put some effort into it. I began to put in countless hours of reading and researching, just trying not to fail. That’s when I learned how to study. Before, I hadn’t realized that was a thing! And at the end of the year, I had all A’s and an invitation to join Phi Theta Kappa [an academic honor society]. For the first time, I felt accomplished.”

Another life-changing moment at South Texas College came when he took a pre-calculus class with instructor Mario Morin. It all “just clicked," said Barrera. "Professor Morin was able to convey information in a way that was understandable, and the concepts were fun to play with and manipulate. I fell in love with doing math homework!”

That pre-calculus class led to Barrera taking calculus 1, 2, and 3 before he graduated and enrolled in the University of Texas Pan American (now UT Rio Grande Valley).

**“These Would Be the Game Changers”**

Once at the UT-RGV, Barrera had the chance to spend a summer doing statistical research at Rice University in Houston with students from all over the world. They became friends, but they also made him recognize the opportunity divide that existed between them. “Many were not first-generation students. They knew how to navigate the world of college… The need to keep up with them was the fire behind my drive.”

Barrera went on to graduate Summa Cum Laude from the University of Texas Pan American with a degree in mathematics and a concentration in applied mathematics. Two days later, he landed a high school teaching position and “fell in love with teaching. “

Midway through his first year of teaching, he applied to get his Master’s degree through the Texas Graduate Center and GEAR UP, a grant-funded program designed to provide financial assistance to high school teachers so they can go on to higher education and leadership positions.

**Harvard Bound**

“I thought the Master’s program was at the UT-RGV but it turned out that the program was at Harvard!” says Barrera. “I was anticipating rejection and almost took the application back.” Despite this, he stuck through it—going to interviews and writing essays throughout the application process—and landed a coveted spot. He continued to teach while taking online classes toward his degree in the evening, and spent his summers on the storied Cambridge, Massachusetts campus.

It was quite a difficult process for the young man from Alamo. “I spent little to no time with my family in those three years. I had to maintain a certain GPA, and of course I had to keep up with my teaching duties during the day. Evenings and weekends, I did nothing but study. But I had the most amazing professors who were willing to go above and beyond the duties of teaching with support even outside the classroom… The whole Harvard community was amazing. And GEAR UP and the Texas Graduate Center provided all the financial support, so my job was just to focus on my studies.”

One of the things that Barrera found gratifying was the impact his story had on his students. Watching their teacher work so hard to get through his classes seemed to greatly inspire them. “It became OK to admit the work was hard, and they learned that powering through it made them stronger,” Barrera says.

In 2016, Barrera graduated from Harvard with a 4.0 and was elected as Class Marshal. He returned to Texas to continue teaching high school mathematics. Soon after his return, he also began teaching mathematics for South Texas College as a dual enrollment/adjunct instructor. Today, Barrera is working with Vanguard Academy GEAR UP as the mathematics content coach.

“It was South Texas College where I figured out who I was, what I could do, and what I was capable of achieving,” says Barrera.

Hard work and perseverance, the support of teachers, friends, and family, and a couple of amazing opportunities helped Juan Barrera achieve all that he has. But it was South Texas College that first unlocked that potential.