

College Students Describe What a School's College-Going Culture Really Means – Full Interviews

Editor's note: In a report, [College Bound and Determined](#), last year IDRA explored how the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district in south Texas transformed itself from low achievement and expectations to planning for all students to graduate from high school and college. This transformation went beyond changing sobering graduation rates or even getting graduates into college. Recently, we interviewed two graduates from PSJA who are now in college, about the district's college-going culture.



Thomas Ray García

Graduate of the PSJA ISD will complete his bachelor's degree May 2016 from Princeton University

Background info

I graduated from PSJA North High School in 2012 in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD. I plan to complete my bachelor studies in May of 2016 at Princeton University. I come from a low-income household with a single mother.

On when he first thought about college for himself

When I was in the eighth grade, I remember talking to my mother about going to college for the first time, and she was very adamant about me going to a top college outside of the state of Texas. She didn't want to put any of the boundaries that are put on students in the Texas' lower Rio Grande Valley and wanted me to expand my life academically and also socially and emotionally... so I could meet students from

broad walks of life and experience diversity outside of the Rio Grande Valley.

I always thought my prospects of going to college were pretty feasible. It was just a matter of how to get there. Most of the other middle school students were not thinking about college nor were we being encouraged because the early college system had not become a district-wide effort yet.

On schools encouraging all students to attend college

It's extremely important for teachers to encourage students at a very early age to think about college and getting them aware of the benefits of a college education. I don't think it's unrealistic at all to encourage all students to go to college. There are many different kinds of colleges, universities, major and minor programs, and certificates available to students from all walks of life. Students from barrios and poor families deserve to go to college. Experiencing college – which will be different to anything they've been exposed to before – is crucial to their growth and development.

On other kinds of college-prep supports for students

Alumni support is one of the most important elements of college awareness and success. Students can get advice about college from their parents and from their counselors and teachers, but it has greatest effect from one who has graduated from their school and gone on to be successful. Alumni can inspire students to consider different career paths.

I founded the [College Scholarship Leadership Awareness Program](#) for PSJA ISD. When I introduce myself as being from Princeton University and having graduated at the top of my class, high school students automatically assume I'm not from the barrio and not from their school district and not even from the Valley. I tell them I am an alumnus from this school district, that I sat at the same school desks and that I came from the same neighborhood. It becomes easy for them to connect with me.

On his experience with a college-ready climate in high school

I've noticed slow but very important changes in climate of the high school I attended. There has always been a sense of wanting the students to be college-ready, but now there is more depth to the speeches and the environment. There is a big difference between putting up posters and talking about college and actually bringing in alumni to give students a first-hand experience beyond what the educators are telling them. Students are given more insights beyond considering a college degree a commodity and a way to get a job and more broadly and deeply see college as a place where they can grow socially and emotionally and know they've authentically grown as a person.

One way teachers are adding depth to the early college experience is by implementing college-level initiatives in their academic curricula. It varies per teacher and per subject, but they are realizing that students need to be prepared academically to go to college. So whether it's treating them as adults at the age of 16 or giving them the freedom of a college student to explore ideas, these are subtle but important steps.

When the college push began, there was an emphasis on acquiring college credits as the sole marker of what it means to be a college student. Over the years, administrators and teachers have become more conscious of other factors that are important, such as social and emotional growth and becoming a leader. Schools are attempting to prepare students emotionally and socially for college, but it is still a challenge. Students do have to adapt to a college campus, and as freshmen they are given some leeway and support... opportunities to make mistakes and move forward. What this means for PSJA and other early college schools and districts is that they must prepare students emotionally and socially so that they can be mature enough to face the challenges a college environment will present.

[Read article about the College Scholarship Leadership Awareness Program in the Rio Grande Guardian.](#)



Pedro Nepomuceno

Graduate of the PSJA ISD and a current student at the University of Texas Health Science Nursing School

Background info and progress in college

In elementary school, I was in the Donna ISD. When I went to school in kindergarten I spoke no English. I did well and was an A student. As my English improved in the first grade, they switched me from the ELL class to the regular classes. By middle school I was in PSJA at Alamo Middle School and was doing very well. I entered high school with credits in algebra and geometry. I was with a group of talented students who all did well academically.

In high school my freshmen and sophomore years weren't very challenging. I took anatomy, which I loved. Upper classes were more challenging. The most advanced math class was pre-calculus. I was in dual-enrollment and graduated from high school with an associate of arts degree in science.

I was accepted at Texas A&M and entered as a junior but changed majors from biology to health science so I took four years to get my bachelor's. I'm now at the University of Texas Health Science Nursing School hoping to become a nurse practitioner in two years.

On the attention his school district is receiving for its college emphasis

Everyone seems to be taking notice of the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district with even President Obama honoring

Dr. King the superintendent. Not only the dual-credit direction but the bilingual program is awesome. The student keeps her language and culture and graduates fully proficient in both languages. My sister attends the same high school I did, and she will graduate with enough college hours for a minor in Spanish. She has taken some of her content courses in Spanish beyond the Spanish language classes.

I had superior counseling. My counselor new all the inroads in scholarships and school finance and I was able to get an \$88,000 scholarship and used it to negotiate with the college I attended to get a full-ride and then some. (That counselor is now a transition counselor, paid by the district, to support students from PSJA who are attending college and works on a college campus.)

On schools encouraging all students to attend college

I think everybody can go to college. Whatever your family's social and economic situation, college is doable. But the teachers have to motivate the students. My pre-cal teacher was great. He was funny. He claimed he was a dragon in a past life. He was very engaging. He would re-explain if someone hadn't gotten the concept. He wasn't bothered by student questions. He didn't water-down the curriculum. He made sure we understood the content. I was usually at the top of his weekly list of the top 10. He'd sometimes greet me in the hallway with, "Hi number 1!"

On the role of teachers

Teachers should encourage students to consider college, believe in their students and ask them "Which college are you going to attend?" The stronger teachers should be placed with the students that need it the most. Weak teachers don't engage their students. They let them get away with not turning in homework. I'm not suggesting teachers should water-down curriculum, but they should figure out ways to motivate the students. I've seen many classes of students that are not perceived as being smart or motivated to learn being taught by teachers who don't have high expectations for their students. It should not be that way.

Teachers should keep high standards, have high expectations for all their students and engage all their students. One of my soccer buddies was also from the *colonia* and was assigned to

my English class and he was struggling with the language. He entered the class having trouble reading, and by the end of the class he was writing awesome essays. She held us all to high standards but also gave the support each student needed.

On school communication with parents

Parents need to be informed. Their support is critical. The Comunitario PTA is informing parents. Parents need to be aware of what is happening in school. They need to keep tabs on teachers and what is happening in the classroom with their children.

My parents are amazing. My family is working class and both of my parents are hard workers. Right now their combined income is about \$25,000. But having a low income is not a barrier. My mom supported me all along. When I enrolled in the dual-credit courses, I had to pay \$500 up front for textbooks. Even though we would be eventually reimbursed, we just didn't have the money. It was when the economy was really bad and my dad had the worst income ever, and he was very sad. My mom sold tamales and baked goods, and somehow we came up with the money I needed during that recession.

On barriers students face getting prepared for college

The institutional barriers are basically bad teachers. My sister hasn't been in the higher level classes as I was. My mom has noticed that when I was in school I had large amounts of homework every week. Now my sister rarely comes with any homework assignments, and my mother thinks that teaching is not as rigorous, at least in my sister's classes. School should treat all students with the same rigor and support them if they need extra help. My sister is not going to graduate as well prepared as I was. When teachers perceive that they don't have the top-notch students, they limit their expectations. I know some Teach For America teachers who have a kind of pity or prejudicial view of students I don't like. You should not treat children differently because of their background – pity is bad.

Yes, everyone can go to college. Just like my friend who had trouble reading and writing: it just took a good teacher. By the end of the semester he wasn't shy in reading in front of the class and he wrote some wonderful essays.