



Braulio Sanchez-Carrasco wants to use his political science major to make a difference.

Name: Braulio Sanchez-Carrasco
College: University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Major: Political Science
Goal: To work for the U.S. Foreign Service Office and go to law school
Advice: "College can help make you who you are...or remind you who you are."

Challenge: **He had no one to show him the way.**

Originally from the Dominican Republic, Braulio attended five high schools in four years, starting in Puerto Rico and finishing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"It gave me the opportunity to meet different people from different countries and backgrounds," said Braulio.

And he kept himself busy. Braulio joined almost every school club, helped tutor other students, studied karate and played tennis, clarinet, piano and cello. He threw himself into his academics, usually not returning home until after nine at night so he wouldn't have to listen to his parents fight. But it was more than that; he realized early on that he was gay.

"I figured if I was so busy with other things, my parents wouldn't wonder why I didn't have a girlfriend," he said.

He knew the hard work would pay off later, but he worried about college and how to pay for it. As an immigrant, he thought he might have to go back to the Dominican Republic simply to go to college.

That wasn't the case. He enrolled at the University of Minnesota, but struggled during his freshman year and his grades suffered. Then his parents separated.

"It felt like my parents gave up on me, but it also put things into perspective," said Braulio.

The financial aid process ended up being more challenging. He stumbled through the process on his own and walked his parents through it because of their limited English. His parents took out a federal parent loan without realizing they would need to make payments while he was in school. Braulio ended up leaving school for a year to help them pay off the loan.

"I thought about not coming back," he admitted, "but the year off helped reinforce that a college degree means I can do something that matters rather than just working a dead-end job."

Braulio returned to the university. He switched his major from music to political science after an introduction to political science class. "You really can't make systematic changes as a musician," explained Braulio. "I wanted to be more hands-on in changing things."

College also provides him with a sense of community, motivation and a drive to achieve.

"There are so many things going on every day: classes, people, clubs, work, volunteering," Braulio said. "It's great being around people who have so much to offer and are excited about life and the future."

Challenge:

Her limited English made passing tests difficult.



Name: Ka Youa Vang
College: College of Saint Benedict
Major: Social Work
Goal: To become a school social worker and to start her own after-school dance program
Advice: "No matter how hard it is, don't give up. Try to find help if you need it."



Ka Youa Vang enjoys teaching traditional Hmong dance.

As the oldest of 14 children, Ka Youa knew she would be a role model for her younger brothers and sisters. It was difficult to learn English at the same time she learned high school math and science, but she sought out help whenever she struggled. Studying English literature helped improve her English language skills, but passing the state's Basic Skills Tests was the biggest challenge.

"I didn't pass any of the tests my sophomore year of high school, and that made me very worried," said Ka Youa. "I'm not good at tests and was concerned about getting into college."

Rather than give up, she studied more, stayed focused and found strategies to help her. Ka Youa got to school at six a.m. to study and, after school, asked for extra help from her teachers. She joined a college prep program called Upward Bound and took summer courses in math, reading and writing. Her friends told her she studied too much, but it paid off and she passed every Basic Skills Test her junior year.

Yet she did more than just study. Ka Youa participated in her school's Asian and dance clubs and played badminton. She also taught traditional Hmong dance to young girls each summer for three years.

Her hard work allowed her to take the next step: college. Although her parents didn't have big expectations or understand the college process, she was determined to go. She saw friends struggle to find decent jobs without a college degree, and realized early on that education would allow her to support herself. She refused to let her struggle with English or the price of college stop her. Ka Youa learned more about college options and how to pay for it through a program at her school and from her cousins who had gone to college. Today, her parents cover the cost of meals while she pays for the rest with a combination of grants, scholarships, work study and loans.

Although the transition from an urban high school to a smaller, less diverse college was difficult at first, Ka Youa doesn't regret her decision. Instead, she is working with the college to find ways to reduce the cultural barriers for future students.

"One of the best things about college is meeting new people from all over the world," she said. "People with different views, different cultures and different religions."

Challenge:

He was tempted to skip college and go straight to work.

Name: Hector Perez-Sacta
College: Minneapolis Business College
Major: Accounting
Goal: To start his own business in the community
Advice: "Never give up your dreams, and always have faith in what you will do in the future."



Hector Perez-Sacta enjoys his accounting job.

Hector knew he liked math, but he struggled in other classes because of his limited English. Science was the worst. "I just didn't get it," said Hector. "I knew I needed biology and chemistry to graduate, but science terms just didn't make sense to me."

Hector faced a different challenge outside of school. He saw other students joining gangs and felt like they were trying to pull him in, too. But that wasn't what he wanted.

"I made the choice not to get involved," said Hector. Instead, he joined his school's Club Latino, a Spanish-speaking group of students who worked in the community. "We tried to learn from each other, and to work with similar groups at other high schools," he said. He quickly became one of club's leaders.

Although he considered getting a full-time job right after high school, Hector knew that people with a college education get better paying jobs. He saw his parents struggle financially, especially before moving to Minnesota. His parents encouraged him to go to college, but he worried

about how to pay for it. His high school academic advisor steered him to scholarship options, and his counselor and teachers explained how to apply for financial aid.

But the first couple of weeks of college were hard. Hector struggled with the accounting terminology and the tests.

"I was afraid I was going to get kicked out," Hector said. He stuck with it and asked for help from his professors. "They were friendly and helped me after class," he said, "but the key was to ask questions about words I didn't understand and to keep up with the reading."

He worked hard and his grades improved. Hector was the first in his family to go to college. Today, he enjoys his accounting job at the Minnesota Department of Revenue. Eventually, he wants to start a neighborhood market to provide job opportunities in the community and items people can't buy elsewhere.

"College was worth it," Hector said. "My financial situation is stable and I can help my parents financially."

Challenge:

She thought people wouldn't like her because she was different.



Name: Tolu Odufuye
College: North Hennepin Community College / University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Major: Biochemistry + medical school
Goal: To become a doctor
Advice: "Believe in yourself. If you believe you can do something, you can achieve it."



Although she was born in the United States, Tolu grew up in Nigeria. "My family wasn't wealthy," she said. "When I was eight years old, my older brother died from third degree burns because my family couldn't afford medical care and I almost died of chicken pox when I was 14."

In her Nigerian middle school, she did so poorly that she says she felt like the dumbest student in school. She got help from her teachers and parents and, by high school, was one of the top students.

"I learned the importance of doing well," said Tolu, "but I was afraid of not finishing. Several of my friends dropped out because they were pregnant." Tolu's family expected her to return to the United States for college so she knew she needed to stay in school. She talked with people who had gone to college in the United States, and learned about financial aid. With dual citizenship, Tolu was eligible for federal aid. She spoke with the college's financial aid office about applying for aid and learned about additional scholarship options. Yet college posed a different challenge.

"I was shy and afraid people would make fun of me because I have an accent and wasn't wearing the 'right' clothes," she said. "I learned that none of that really matters. People care about who you are, not what you wear or look like."

Tolu transferred to the University of Minnesota after two years at North Hennepin Community College. "I was lazy about taking the last classes to complete my associate degree," Tolu said. "With a two-year degree, I could have gotten a better-paying job while studying at the university."

Classes also seemed much harder after she transferred. Her instructors referred her to tutors and recommended studying with other students. "I needed to learn how to identify the most important points in the reading," she said.

College also meant developing time-management skills and being self-disciplined. "There are a lot of distractions," said Tolu. "You need to learn how to prioritize."

Tolu is now enrolled at the Mayo Medical School in Rochester. Someday, she hopes to work as a doctor in a medically underserved area in the United States or in another country.

"People respect you more if you go to college rather than stopping at high school," she said. "And you meet people who can help you achieve your dreams."

Tolu Odufuye is in medical school studying to become a doctor.

Challenge:

A severe reading disability threatened her future.

Name: Amanda Durhman
College: Minnesota State University Moorhead
Major: Mass Communications + Art
Goal: To own her own photography studio
Advice: "Try the first semester of college and go from there. You have nothing to lose."



Amanda Durhman works as a professional corporate photographer in Rochester.

Amanda was told early on that her severe dyslexia would keep her from doing things she wanted to do, including becoming a lawyer, which was her dream. Because she had only a third-grade reading and writing level, her high school teachers wanted to put her in lower-level courses, but she and her mother insisted she attend regular classes.

Still, it took her longer than everyone else to get her work done. Her papers would come back marked up in red. Reading out loud was even worse. "Some teachers would let me pass on reading out aloud in class; others would not," she said. "I would struggle with the words. It was, and still is, a horrible and humiliating experience."

But Amanda made herself study and work hard. "I kept proving to people that I could do more than they expected," she said. "I wanted to prove people wrong."

She found school activities in which she excelled, like volleyball and basketball. She also was a member of the Key and Science Clubs. Having good friends made dealing with her dyslexia a bit easier.

"No one is good at everything. I think it's important to find activities that you are good at, that you can accomplish and do well," Amanda said. "It makes those things that are hard for you easier to take."

Many people, including teachers, thought she could not handle college, and tried to discourage her from considering it as an option. Instead, they tried to steer her down an easier path so she wouldn't be disappointed.

"It was hard to hear," she admitted, "but I realize now that they were trying to let me down easy in case I didn't get accepted into college, or if I failed in college."

Amanda enrolled at Minnesota State University Moorhead. At first, she thought maybe she couldn't handle the work. There was less of a support structure in college; but the university provided books on tape, class note-takers and tests read aloud. Amanda wouldn't have gotten as far or progressed as quickly as she did without knowing what the state and the university could provide to help disabled individuals.

"The professors were cooperative and understanding," she said, "but they didn't go easy on me just because I had dyslexia." Amanda never gave up and she didn't let anything or anyone stand in her way. She knew her limitations and worked around them with great success.