

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## STUDENTS

# The Long Last Miles to College

How 2 low-income students weathered an uncertain season

By Eric Hoover | OCTOBER 08, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM

## DALLAS



Allison V. Smith for The Chronicle

Ramon Alfaro won scholarships to colleges in New York City and Texas. He wanted a college with a dance team.

Ramon Alfaro and Marisol Perez walked into a Starbucks around 4 p.m., worn down by months of doubt. All along they had wanted the same thing: to leave home, decorate a dorm-room wall, and shape a new life. But wanting something, they knew, guarantees nothing at all.

It was early August, and the thick air clung to every shirt. Mr. Alfaro — slight, with a shadow of a beard — stood in line just

ahead of Ms. Perez, who slid off her tinted aviators to reveal a pair of wide, brown eyes that matched her long hair. The teenagers ordered iced drinks and took seats at a long table. Soon a dozen members of Moisés E. Molina High School's Class of 2017 were chatting over the growl of blenders.

Two months after graduation, they had come for one last meeting with their college counselor, one last chance to ask questions, one last dash of reassurance. They all planned to leave Dallas for other towns, other states: the unknown of college. But even then, not everyone knew if they were really going.

The students turned to Jocelyn Powers, an earnest 22-year-old with long red hair, who passed around copies of a to-do list (make a tuition-payment plan, check for reading

assignments, contact your roommate). She gave packing tips and advice for living on a budget. Most of her students came from low-income families; none had a parent who had graduated from a four-year college.

When Ms. Powers recalled her first week as an undergraduate, some eager listeners leaned in close, absorbing her experience. "It doesn't feel real," said one soon-to-be freshman, shaking her head. "I know!" said another.

Questions flew. Are 17 credit-hours a lot? Should I buy all my textbooks at once? Do I have to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid every year? The students had no one else to ask.

The road to college is long, and the last miles can prove especially difficult. Between committing to go and move-in day, many challenges keep low-income and first-generation students, especially those who lack helpful guides, from reaching their chosen campuses. Recent research on "summer melt" found that 20 to 30 percent of low-income graduates of urban school districts who had been accepted by — and planned to attend — four-year colleges didn't end up enrolling anywhere.

From afar, the problem might seem as simple as a lack of will, a case of cold feet. But watch students' lives unfold up close, and you'll see a mesh of circumstances as complex as the students themselves. Here, just south of downtown Dallas, parental expectations yanked Mr. Alfaro, a dancer, this way and that. Red tape entangled Ms. Perez, an undocumented immigrant who loves math. For both, worries about money, always, loomed over everything.

Ms. Powers knew their stories. All summer she tried to keep them and others motivated, on track, excited. She emailed them. She texted them. She invited them to these weekly college-prep sessions at Starbucks.

As the last one wound down, Ms. Powers felt hopeful. She knew that Mr. Alfaro and Ms. Perez, who both graduated in the top 10 percent of their class, were sharp. They had thought hard about their college plans. Still, the counselor had reason to worry that one of them would, by the end of August, see those plans melt away.

Ramon Alfaro longed to live in New York City, where dancers go to dance. During his sophomore year he first felt the rush of gliding through space, music in his limbs. The next year he made the school dance team and performed at halftime shows and competitions. By senior year he and his teammate Lisette Sandoval-Perez, a close friend, had a plan: They would attend college in Manhattan and explore the metropolis together.

Last winter Mr. Alfaro set his sights on two colleges that had offered him a decent amount of money. One was the New York Institute of Technology, where \$18,000 in scholarships would cover about half of the tuition and fees. Not bad, he thought. He would join the dance club, taste the arts scene he'd read all about, and major in science. He considered a career in radiology, something his sister, Martha, had hoped to pursue, when she still thought she'd make it to college. The lithe young man with the thick-frame glasses pictured himself working — a lot, if necessary — to help pay his way. But his father imagined no such thing.

Some collegebound graduates may be stunned to see their plans unravel. And yes, unforeseen events, like a parent's losing a job in July, can suddenly change a person's course. Yet many crises don't come out of the blue. Often they're rooted in longstanding fears, a misunderstanding of financial aid, financial insecurity. Sometimes they're based in a family's identity and culture. Or in the intricate relationship between parent and child.

Mr. Alfaro's father, Alejandro, grew up in Chihuahua, Mexico. He polished shoes and mowed lawns and cleaned cars to support his parents. In Texas, he worked constantly, living in a one-bedroom apartment with his wife, Maria, and Ramon's two older siblings. He completed a welding program at a technical college while working full time. The credential helped him get a solid job at a factory, and rent a three-bedroom house for his family. He didn't want his children to struggle as he had, or to start their lives in debt.

So when Mr. Alfaro showed him NYIT's aid package, there was no celebrating. Even after the son explained that scholarships didn't need to be repaid, his father scoffed at the prospect of taking out loans to cover the remaining \$16,000. The family earned just enough that colleges would expect them to contribute more than most of his classmates,

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## Students on the Margins

For many low-income students, college is a question mark. Fill out this form to download a booklet about their experiences. You'll see their lives unfold, and a tangle of circumstances as complex as the students themselves.

First Name \*

Last Name \*

Job Title \*

Organization \*

E-mail Address \*



some of whom wouldn't have to pay a dollar out of pocket.

Money was one concern, distance another. You're the last one, Mr. Alfaro, the youngest, often heard his father say. I want you to be close by. Mountain View College, a community college, was a short walk from the front door. You can just go there, and come back home every day.

But Mr. Alfaro didn't want that at all. It's my life, he would say, not yours.

Finally, his father gave him an order: You can't leave Texas.

Days later, Ms. Powers, the counselor, tried calling Mr. Alfaro's father. Though she wasn't sure the family could afford to send a kid to Manhattan, she wanted

them to at least understand why their son wished to go, why the opportunity was important. She didn't get many words out before he hung up on her.

The demise of the New York plan fractured Mr. Alfaro's friendship with Ms. Sandoval-Perez, who didn't want to go alone. Finding a college, he thought, was ruining his life.

Dejected, Mr. Alfaro applied to a handful of Texas colleges, including Stephen F. Austin State University, almost three hours away in Nacogdoches. He visited the campus, found it beautiful, and learned about the dance program. He imagined himself there.

When April came, Mr. Alfaro showed his acceptance letter to his father. After a dinner of chicken and potatoes that night, an argument flared up. It's too far, his father said of Stephen F. Austin. You're not going. The young man protested, raising his voice. He

glared at the shorter, sturdier version of himself with a graying mustache.

They shouted back and forth until the teenager stormed down the hall and slammed his bedroom door. He flopped on his bed, surrounded by orange walls and medals from dance competitions. A few minutes later, his father walked in without knocking.

Their fight ended the same way all the others had, with his father hugging him tightly. I'm sorry, he told his son. I love you. But he hadn't changed his mind about Stephen F. Austin.

Mr. Alfaro felt trapped. His options had once seemed as vast as the map of the United States. Yet the map kept shrinking, leaving only Texas, and then, in one night, even less than that.



Allison V. Smith for The Chronicle

Marisol Perez, who loves math and graduated seventh out of 450 at Moisés E. Molina High School, applied to a dozen state colleges in Texas. She was accepted by all of them.

At Moisés A. Molina High School, where nearly all students are Hispanic, there isn't school spirit so much as "family spirit," Ms. Powers learned in her first year as a college counselor. Everyone — baby brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins — turned out for school events.

With light skin and freckles, Ms. Powers doesn't look like most of her students, though she is half Hispanic herself. She understands the bonds here in the Oak Cliff borough of Dallas. Growing up in the suburbs nearby, she helped care for her little sister, and, after leaving for college, felt the separation deeply.

Many students she advised at Molina wanted to earn a degree and build a career so that they could give back to their families. Marisol Perez, soft-spoken and matter-of-fact, hoped to buy her mother and father a house someday. But first she would have to leave

them.

Ms. Perez was 10 months old when her parents brought her here from Durango, Mexico. She took to numbers early. Whenever she looked at a math problem, her mind turned clear as water. She could see each step, solve the whole thing without pencil and paper. She liked the certainty of knowing there was a right answer. And she liked that she could find it faster than most of her classmates could.

Ms. Perez applied to about a dozen state colleges and was accepted by all of them. She planned to major in computer science. The only question was how to pay for it.

Her parents made little money but had saved about \$5,000 for college. Her savings from a part-time job at Church's Chicken were meager. Without citizenship, she was ineligible for federal aid. Yet she could get help from Texas, which is among a handful of states that give aid to undocumented students.

Last winter, Ms. Perez filled out the required form, the Texas Application for State Financial Aid, or Tasfa. She compiled her parents' 2015 tax information and completed the tedious income-verification process. Many colleges also required her to send an affidavit confirming that she lived in Texas.

Ultimately, Ms. Perez chose Stephen F. Austin. Admissions officers there had shown the most interest in her. Though her mother wanted her to stay close to home, she sought to separate herself from distractions. So I can be more independent, she told her family. She liked the vibe of the campus, the peaceful feeling she got walking beneath its trees. And best of all, one of her closest friends was going there, too.

There was just one problem. As May came to a close, Ms. Perez still didn't know how much her family would have to pay. The cost of attendance would total more than \$20,000 a year. The university had given her an academic scholarship of \$3,000, but that was all. Her parents couldn't qualify for federal loans, and she didn't know how they would cover the rest. While many students get a final aid package well before May, undocumented students in Texas must often wait longer for theirs. Ultimately they might not get much, if anything.

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That spring, a festive mood swept through the school's colorful hallways. Food for sale filled the warm air with the scent of grilled corn, quesadillas, and fajitas. The student mariachi band shook the cafeteria with sound.

Yet Ms. Perez retreated. An office aide in the counseling department, she'd helped many classmates complete their aid forms, double-checking each one. But as graduation neared, Ms. Powers noticed her pulling back from conversations with friends, busying herself with homework. Something is overshadowing her, the counselor thought, and she knew what it was.

While other seniors were choosing dorms and meal plans, Ms. Perez didn't know what would happen to her. Would she end up on campus in Nacogdoches, or at home in Dallas? It would all come down to math. But in this equation, her numbers wouldn't necessarily add up.

**U**ncertainty is a heavy chain. It weighs you down, tires you out. Mr. Alfaro resolved to break it.

In April he visited Texas Woman's University, a coeducational institution in Denton, to try out for the dance team. He won a spot. The university had offered him substantial scholarships, and it was only about 40 miles away. Still, his father wouldn't give him permission to go. Possibly, he kept saying.

Then one afternoon Mr. Alfaro called his mother from the school library and told her he couldn't wait any longer to pay the housing deposit. She read him her credit-card number, he entered it online, and a confirmation message flashed before his eyes. The payment, a crucial step toward enrolling, remained a secret between mother and son.

In the weeks that followed, Mr. Alfaro's father didn't endorse his plan to attend the university but more or less acquiesced to it. Ramon could go to orientation in July, and then ... they would see.

In June, Mr. Alfaro's parents threw him a joyous graduation party, where guests rode a mechanical bull and whacked a cap-and-gown piñata, which his sister had stuffed with candy. Everything seemed fine.

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Then Mr. Alfaro went to orientation, where he received a white folder with a copy of his tuition bill inside. When he saw the \$4,800 balance, he thought, Oh.

Previously, logging into his student portal, he'd seen a much smaller number. But he realized he'd been looking at a preliminary tally, which didn't include all the courses he'd registered for, all the fees. Anxious, he carried the folder home.

A couple nights later, Mr. Alfaro sat down in his room to read the Supreme Court justice Sonia Sotomayor's memoir, *My Beloved World*, which the university had assigned to incoming freshmen. His father came in and sat beside him. It hurts my heart to say we can't come up with that money, he said. We'll find somewhere else for you to go.

His mother consoled him as he thought about calling the director of the dance team to say he wasn't coming. At a community college, he knew, he wouldn't be able to dance.

That evening Mr. Alfaro texted his college counselor. "Ms powers I'm literally crying my dad said I can't go to TWU," he wrote. "He's calling tomorrow to let them know I can't attend bc financial issues." Ms. Powers wrote back, asking if he wanted to talk. No reply.

She didn't know until later that the night had taken a surprising turn. Minutes after saying Texas Woman's University was too expensive, Mr. Alfaro's father heard him crying. He returned to his son's room and saw him, head in his hands, shaking with sobs.

Looking down, he felt responsible for his son's sadness, he would recall later. Guilty. He asked his son a question. What if I get out of work tomorrow, and we head up to the school and talk to them?

Generally, affluent parents don't hesitate to advocate for their collegebound children. Yet the parents of low-income students often don't know what to do, or if they can intervene at all. But sometimes, just showing up can make a big difference.

The next morning, Mr. Alfaro and his father drove to Denton in a Chevy pickup. They went to the financial-aid office and waited. After a couple hours, they sat down with a helpful adviser who saw that the student qualified for an additional scholarship of \$1,000. On her advice, they went to the housing office and arranged to swap a double



room for a triple. Then they signed up for a less expensive meal plan. All of that reduced the bill to about \$2,500.

Walking back to the truck, Mr. Alfaro saw his father smile. We did it, he said, wrapping his arm around his son's shoulder. We got your bill down!

Mr. Alfaro thanked him for taking the day off work. He texted the good news to Ms. Powers, who was pleasantly stunned. It wasn't every day that students got their bills reduced by almost half. "Nice!!" she texted back. "So you're still going to college!"

"YES OMG," he wrote. "THANK GOD."

Riding home on highway I-35, Mr. Alfaro said little to his father. He put on headphones and filled his ears with indie pop. He wasn't bound for New York or even for his second-choice campus. But he was going to college, where he could dance. That made him happy.

Still, it was hard to shake the feeling he had carried throughout the search. The feeling that, at any moment, everything could fall apart.

Each year the question echoes across the nation, posed to teenagers who plan to pursue a degree. Are you ready for college?

Proud relatives asked Ms. Perez at her graduation party, where guests enjoyed a tres leches cake adorned with her senior-class photo. What could she tell them? She had just graduated seventh in her class of 450. She had studied relentlessly. Yeah, she was ready in every way but one: money.

Officials at Stephen F. Austin say they tell accepted students that the university might give them more aid during the summer, as other students who were offered aid decide not to enroll. Ms. Perez understood that she would get more aid, though she didn't know how much. When she called the admissions office in June, she remembered, she was told she would get an answer at orientation, in late July.

She had no choice but to wait. Her mother reassured her. We'll find a way, she kept saying. But Ms. Perez knew that her parents didn't understand what it might cost. Even if

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they could find a way to borrow serious money — and the odds were iffy, at best — she didn't want to give them that burden. She thought of her 13-year-old sister, Ruth, who would soon have college expenses of her own.

As the days inched by, Ms. Perez earned as much money as she could. Five days a week she drove to the printing company where she and her mother worked a 12-hour night shift. She cut paper, stuffed booklets into boxes, and ran the shrink-wrap machine, all of which left her hands nicked and blistered. When she and her mother drove home in the waning darkness before sunrise, they were often too tired to speak.

At orientation, Ms. Perez felt a rush of excitement. She and her close friend Alexandra Vega, whom she had known since elementary school, had arranged to live together on campus. They saw their dorm, met some future neighbors, and ate in the cafeteria. She was given a purple Stephen F. Austin T-shirt; she bought two others in different styles.

The next day, Ms. Perez went to the financial-aid office, expecting to finally see an updated aid award. She left frustrated. The staff was still reviewing Tasfa applications, she recalled being told. She got a business card from a staff member who said the university would put her at the top of the list because she had come to inquire in person.

Back home, Ms. Perez checked her account twice a day. Nothing. She called. Next week, she was told. That week came and went with no answer. Eighteen days passed between orientation and the sweltering day she drove to Starbucks for the last college-prep session. All that waiting had drained her.

n the air-conditioned cafe, Mr. Alfaro sipped a strawberry concoction through a straw. His brand-new student ID hung from a lanyard around his neck. Though happy to be

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Going to Texas Woman's University, he couldn't help but envy classmates heading off to their first-choice colleges, like the young woman at the end of the table who had received a ton of money from the University of Rochester.

Mr. Alfaro looked up at Ms. Powers and raised his eyebrows. He liked to tease her for worrying about him. "Powers," he deadpanned, "how do you drop out of college?"

"You don't do that."

"I want to know. Just in case."

"No, you're gonna like it."

"Ohhh," he said, frowning, then lowering his voice: "I hope so."

"Ramon, you are."

A few minutes later, Ms. Powers pulled her chair close to Ms. Perez, who looked sullen. Move-in day at Stephen F. Austin was just over two weeks away. "So," the counselor asked her, "what do you want to do?"

Ms. Perez stared at Ms. Powers for a while without answering. "It's difficult," she said finally. She looked down and picked at her elbow.

She had been thinking about registering for classes at Mountain View, the nearby community college, so that she would have a backup plan. "What I fear is that I wait, don't go anywhere," she said, "and end up wasting this semester."

Ms. Powers nodded. "I know how determined you are," she said. "I know you're going to end up at a four-year school, no matter what."

Ms. Perez smiled halfheartedly. Behind her a barista shouted an order for a venti iced latte.

"Keep me updated," Ms. Powers said. "If you do freak out, text me, and I'll calm you down."

Three days later when Ms. Perez logged into her Stephen F. Austin portal, she finally saw

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that the university had added a state grant to her award. Many months after receiving her acceptance, she knew what she owed. She looked at the numbers and, for a moment, felt nothing.

Then she picked up her phone. "I received my financial aid ms. powers," she texted. "I'm not going to sfa."

Ms. Perez had hoped to get \$15,000, so that her family would have to pay around \$5,000. Or even \$10,000 in grants and scholarships might suffice, she'd thought. In the end, she got \$5,000: the \$3,000 academic scholarship she had already received, and only \$2,000 more in state grants.

Expectations and reality for financial aid often collide dramatically. And bureaucracy can keep low-income students in limbo for months. Tasfa applications are processed manually, officials at Stephen F. Austin say, so undocumented students seeking aid are often subject to longer wait times. And the university didn't get its final student-aid allocation from the state until late spring, which complicated efforts to award that money to all eligible applicants. The funds are limited, especially for undocumented students, university officials say, a point they make upfront to applicants. Typically, the largest grants are \$5,000, much less than Ms. Perez had hoped for.

Her award made her angry. And she felt dumb for thinking she would get a whole lot more.

But Ms. Powers was ready to advocate for her student. "I can't believe it," she texted Ms. Perez. "I'm gonna try and fix it."

The counselor called the financial-aid office. You dropped the ball, she said, urging the university to take a closer look at Ms. Perez's grades. Days later, the student received \$6,000 more in aid, for a total of \$11,000.

Yet by then Ms. Perez was fed up. Stung by the initial offer, she no longer wanted to go. And she reached a conclusion that many low-income students do: What seems doable months out looks impossible when the final bill arrives. The remaining gap — about \$10,000 — was still too large, she decided. Federal loans, grants, and work-study weren't

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an option. So she registered at Mountain View, where she'd pay a fraction of that.

Ms. Perez broke the news to her friend Ms. Vega over lunch at a chicken-wing joint. Ms. Vega was shaken. I was supposed to do this with you, she said. They had already split the cost of a new TV for their dorm room.

The night before Ms. Vega left for Stephen F. Austin, Ms. Perez met her for dinner. About to leave home, the young woman was visibly anxious. She worried about becoming so emotional on move-in day that she would climb back into the car with her parents.

It's OK, Ms. Perez said as reassuringly as she could, telling her friend what she had been telling herself. It's going to be OK.

Each admissions cycle delivers a fresh crop of stories about poor kids who've catapulted themselves into an Ivy League college, where they won't have to pay a dime in tuition. There's nothing wrong with those stories, really. They're often revealing, even inspiring.

Yet a casual reader might overlook just how exceptional many of the details are. Relatively few low-income and first-generation students apply to the nation's wealthiest and most-selective colleges. Most of those who do aren't accepted (also, most lottery players don't end up with winning tickets). The great bulk of needy students seeking a four-year degree end up on campuses where resources are scarce, and getting in doesn't equal a full ride. Or they don't even get to attend four-year colleges.

**E**ach admissions cycle also affirms the truth that even smart kids with big dreams, who study hard and display grit, must navigate a complex system run by a vast crew of adults. Enrollment chiefs and financial-aid directors. College counselors and high-school teachers. Parents. Their actions greatly help or hinder a given student's chances, especially when his or her college plans hang by a thread.

If his father hadn't objected to a faraway college, Mr. Alfaro probably would've enrolled somewhere else. Then again, if his father hadn't suggested visiting Texas Woman's University, and if a helpful financial-aid adviser hadn't taken the time to listen, he almost certainly wouldn't have enrolled there weeks later. If Ms. Powers hadn't pleaded

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with Stephen F. Austin's financial-aid office, Ms. Perez wouldn't have received a more-generous aid award, even though it was for naught.

Summer is perilous because helpful adults are often in short supply. Many applicants don't have a college counselor like Ms. Powers, who kept working after her contract ended, on July 1, who made colorful handouts for her students, and who tried to give them her full attention even when she was tired.

Most families she met valued education highly but found the admissions process daunting. Crucial words like "Fafsa" and "aid" were often difficult to understand. As another school year begins, she is planning ways to build a stronger college-going culture among the mothers and fathers of Molina High.

She keeps in touch with Mr. Alfaro, who has settled in at Texas Woman's University. She was right: He likes it there. He's the only male member of the Pioneer Pride Dance Team, which performs at volleyball and basketball games. He's practicing hard, making friends, and hoping to receive a dance scholarship.

In Dallas, Ms. Perez is taking four classes at Mountain View. She likes philosophy, where she's writing a midterm paper on ethical choices. At home she helps cook and clean, and she's happy to be around her family. But this isn't the life she wanted.

Her disappointment has sharpened her determination. Despite her fears about what undocumented immigrants might face in the future, she plans to save money and transfer to a four-year college, though where she doesn't know just yet.

She still has all three Stephen F. Austin T-shirts. The purple remnants of her plans are crammed with old blouses in her bottom dresser drawer.

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