



# UNIVERSITY HALLS Not Prison Walls

By Diego James Navarro

*"The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness, and in human responsibility."*

*-Vaclav Havel, addressing the US Congress*



**S**INCE 1999 I HAVE BEEN UNDER THE WEIGHT OF A CONCERN FOR YOUNG ADULT STUDENTS AFFECTED BY POVERTY. Many of these young people come from marginalized communities and experience poverty in its many manifestations. Inadequate schools, crime and violence are three primary examples. My calling is simple: I am a community college teacher trying to reclaim the lives of young people too often lost to juvenile hall, prisons, and drug-treatment programs before entering or after dropping out of a community college.

There is a Friends Committee on Legislation- California bumper sticker that reads, "University Halls not Prison Walls." That is what my program, the Academy for College Excellence (ACE), provides students at risk of not completing college.

To understand why I designed ACE the way it is, and the students whom we serve, one must first understand my own experience growing up in a marginalized community where I was a victim of inadequate schooling, neighborhood violence, and family trauma. I was raised in Pomona, California. People unfamiliar with the area often assume that my hometown houses Pomona College, but they are mistaken. Pomona College is located in Claremont where the Claremont Colleges reside; the

I remember Pomona High shutting down for a week every year due to student riots. My junior high school was just two blocks down the road, and between classes we would dodge rioting high schoolers running through our hallways. I saw a friend who lived across the street from our home getting jumped by what looked like twenty-five people on the school grounds. As you might imagine, I was hyper-vigilant as a kid, always watching my back. I had to be.

As I was witnessing this physical violence in school, my parents were fighting verbally at home. In ninth grade, my mother was diagnosed with cancer for the second time. This time it turned out to be bone cancer, and she died when I was fifteen and a half. It was 1972, a time before pain control and hospice services were widely available. Towards the end of her life I would wake up at night to her screaming in pain.

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City of Pomona is on the "other side of the tracks." In grade school I was placed in the highest English and math classes, but in junior high my last name, Navarro, preceded me and I was tracked into wood shop, metal shop, and electric shop. I started getting lost in the education world in junior high school. In Pomona, the community would not pass school bonds. As a result, by the time I reached high school classes were down from seven periods to five.

Living in Pomona, I witnessed a lot of violence. Many families moved to Pomona during the reconstruction period that followed the Watts riots in 1968. We had the Bloods and the Crips gangs in our neighborhoods. Some of my friends kept guns in their lockers, retrieving them at the end of the day so they could protect themselves as they walked home.

School became irrelevant to what I was experiencing in my life, to my experiences at home. I started drinking in 9th grade and no one at school noticed. It was a way to cope, and it wasn't uncommon for youth my age. In our neighborhood, if you didn't have a strong family, or were living in the midst of a traumatic situation, you were left up to the influence of the dominant youth culture, the strip mall culture. This was the early 70s after all, in the suburbs of Southern California.

Though my parents were members of Claremont Meeting and I attended well into my early teens, I never felt truly connected there. The Meeting members didn't seem to know the struggles facing my family. I didn't receive solace or support during these times. It wasn't until high school when I attended JYM (Junior Yearly Meeting) at Pacific Yearly Meeting (Pacific YM), where I bonded deeply with my peers, that I felt safe and free. I experienced an alternative "universe," one far away from my life in Pomona. Leaving Pacific YM each year, I would feel a deep ache in my chest, already missing my community of Junior Friends.

When I graduated from Pomona High, I could not read or write at the college-level. I went to Pasadena City College for my first years of college. Fortunately, I also experienced numerous Young Adult Friends' gatherings. In December 1975, during my first year of college, I attended the first New Year's Gathering at Ben Lomond Quaker Center. Following this initial gathering, the Western Young Friends met together every New Year, sometimes with over one hundred Young Adult Friends in attendance. In 1978, I attended my first Young Friends of North America gathering. Coming from a liberal Yearly Meeting, YFNA was an eye-opening experience. I was introduced to Meeting for Worship with a concern for business. We were serious about worship, about connecting deeply with each other and letting the Spirit inform our community.

At each gathering of Young Adult Friends, I was able to go beyond the pain and suffering of my youth and teenage years. I felt I was not alone and, perhaps more importantly, felt like I was a part of a community that was "in this together." I realized that a lot of us from urban environments were deep in the trenches. We were "living in the world" but not always successful at "not being of the world." Our Quakerism, our faith, was informed by some truly horrible situations, and a lot of our families were unable to support us, both economically and emotionally. For many of us, our parents were

not aware of how our life circumstances in our neighborhoods and schools were affecting us.

At these Young Adult Quaker gatherings we would bond and connect at a very deep level. The suffering created an authenticity among us and through this community we allowed our wounds to heal. We formed Worship Fellowship groups, men and women support groups, pre-business meetings, and held interest groups where we invited Yearly Meeting elders to seed our discussions. We experienced our deep, wounded places together and, through caring for one another, filled them with hope and love.

Unfortunately my students don't have the loving support of a Quaker Young Adult community. However, they have found the ACE program, whose design was informed by my experiences growing up among Friends. Many of my students come with wounds caused by earlier educational experiences and rough lives, yet they have woken up to the possibility of what higher education can offer.

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I have found that there are times when an individual is forced to look at themselves and make new choices because of the convergence of particular circumstances. For some of us, the convergence occurs because of a death, a family break up or an abusive relationship. For others, it is when they are in the midst of an intense social situation, like being expelled from school, getting busted and kicked off a high school sports team, exiting prison, or being forced to enter a drug treatment program.

At these times, we can be reached in a way that is not always possible before that point. These circumstances may cause the beginning of a thirst to understand oneself, to wake up from the trance, to notice routines and habits. Early Friends might call it the "lifting of the veil" or see it as the beginning of the conviction process. One begins to see the power of the Light in one's life. These negative situations are the opportunities to experience the power of "being in the world but not of the world" and begin to examine deeply one's sense of self.

One opportunity where this type of self-inquiry happens is the first time an individual goes to the county jail, where they begin to question their ways and begins to think about changing their lives for

the better. We need to find a way to capture these individuals and provide them with alternatives to the prison industrial complex.

I see young people come into my class every year with signs of enduring significant stress, including post-traumatic stress disorder, or something like it. They're hyper-vigilant, unable to focus, and are multitasking a lot. When I first decided to help students with teenage lives similar to mine, I knew that recognizing and witnessing to our wounds was important, as was working on reflection and building of authentic community, just as I had done with Young Adult Quakers. This is the vessel that would help to build the capacity for healing, growth, and, ultimately, success.

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My experience with Young Friends served as my guide for the design of the Academy for College Excellence's Foundation Course, a two-week intensive orientation course. During the development and piloting of the program, I sought ways to provide students with experiences similar to the ones I had helped to create as Clerk of Pacific Yearly Meeting's Young Adult Friends group and the New Year's gathering, but in a secular collegiate environment.

It wasn't easy. One of the first things I realized during the pilot phase of the ACE Foundation Course curriculum—after several forty-hour curriculum pilots, mind you—was that the behaviors developed for survival in violent and traumatic situations do not apply well to the academic environment of college. (They do help in graduate school, however!)

How do you get students to believe they can succeed in college when they did poorly in high school and still carry the wounds from that and other experiences?

We begin with a Foundation Course, which is a two-week long, three-credit course. Students start the day at 9am and end at 5:30pm for eight days. In this high-intensity, high-intimacy setting, they rediscover that they are smart, that they can think, and that they can grow and change. They begin to soften. I call this transformation "lighting the fire within." It only works if students attend full-time, are accountable to each other, and stick together. Additionally, high expectations and group accountability will make or break the group.

These students, though often written off by the educational world, are not dumb; many, in fact, are brilliant. Sometimes high school was too simple. Always the behaviors and habits of the street, and misunderstandings of academic cultural cues—so necessary for success in college and professional careers—lead to attrition.

Our student support model, embedded in curriculum, is one that promotes persistence, accelerates remedial learning, and helps students accumulate college transfer credits. Research shows that if you get students to fifteen academic credits they have much higher levels of completion. Get them to thirty credits, and the level of completion is even more dramatic. A nine-semester longitudinal research study of the ACE program, conducted by Columbia University's Community College Research Center, indicated that students enrolled in the ACE program had 140% greater chance of completing associate-level English and over an 80% greater chance of completing transfer-level English as compared to the 11,500 students from the comparison group.

Like the two-week Foundation Course, the entire ACE semester is very intense. Students take 16.5 college credits, a staggering amount for those in remedial education. In this first semester we set up the college experience culturally, giving students a taste of what is to come and providing them with the tools to face it when it does come. Because of the cohort community, which moves together from the Foundation Course and into the ACE semester, students are supported by one another to complete those 16.5 college credits and continue to hold each other accountable throughout their college experience. In some ways, we put them on a spiritual journey—the college journey—and make sure that it is done in a supportive and thoughtful way.

Let's take a step back to look at the larger issue. On a nationwide basis 60% of enrolling community college students enter college underprepared for college-level math or English. While unfortunate, the real tragedy is that over 60% of them leave before completing remedial English and over 80% leave before completing remedial math. Unfortunately, given the conditions of our society they may end up in jail or prison. To add insult to injury, 25% of ACE's incoming students received their high school diplomas from continuation schools, meaning they had been dropped from their comprehensive high schools, and 22% do not have a high school diploma.

Community colleges were designed for the students of the 1950's and early '60's, people who were

college-ready and had lives that were different than students attending today. With 60% of incoming community college students underprepared for college-level academics, a great deal of stress is placed on remedial programs, many of which are not helping. In fact, most community college remedial programming mimics the remedial programs found in high schools. Einstein's definition of insanity, "If you try to do the same thing over and over again, and expect different results," certainly applies here.

So the ACE program does things differently. We build community, we foster new behaviors, and we remind the students that they do have academic expertise, grounded in their life experiences; they just don't know it yet. They have huge strengths in persistence and survival. They have had to overcome significant obstacles in their lives, yet they do not easily translate those strengths to the academic environment.

To help them realize this knowledge, we incorporate a project-based social justice course into the ACE semester curriculum, based on primary research. We have found through extensive piloting that students with low literacy skills are perfectly able to conduct primary research, rather than synthesize multiple sources as traditionally done in lower division courses. We utilize a graduate school pedagogy for low-literacy students entering college. Experientially, my students are PhDs in social injustice, having lived through countless inequalities whether they are aware of them or not. We build on this expertise. Together we brainstorm about the social justice issues that have affected them, whether in their own lives, in their communities, or in their families. Students fill the white board with issues and prioritize those they feel most passionate about. In the end four to eight issues are chosen. The class is then formed into teams, and over a thirteen week period they investigate the issue in their community, going through all the steps of research, and then building a community action plan to resolve their issue of choice.

Students in the ACE program also spend time learning about compassion and non-violent communication over the course of the semester. In our first program pilot in 2002, we had students from Youth Build, a program that takes students who did not graduate from high school and puts them into a construction program while they work to get their GED. Usually these students are adjudicated youth, sometimes from a gang background. For our first class of this pilot, the students came into class a half-hour late because of a fight in the parking lot. I did not know it at the time, but our college happens to be in a Norteno neighborhood, and a

group of our Youth Build students, from a Sureno neighborhood, were sitting in their car in the school parking lot when the fight broke out. In the fight one of these students got sliced with a knife. From this experience, I realized the ACE curriculum needed to have a more explicit focus on giving them tools to address the violence in their lives. Later that summer I was introduced to the Alternatives to Violence Project at Pacific Yearly Meeting and incorporated it into the Foundation Course curriculum.

There are other Friends-influenced aspects of the program. In order to support student performance, we developed, for the ACE semester, a Team Self-Management class designed to help students reflect on their lives. It gives them a chance to identify the behaviors that keep them from attaining their goals and being successful in school. It makes their implicit choices explicit. In ACE we call it this reflection time "focusing", but Friends might see it as going inward. Students sit together in silence and share with each other from a set of queries, providing space in between for reflection. It is a secular form of worship sharing.

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*University Halls not Prison Walls* is a call for social justice. Instead of fostering success in our disaffected youth, our society is building prisons for these young people. As the Religious Society of Friends, we have a long history of testimonies around prisons, and we have an equally passionate commitment to education. By addressing the needs of these young people who live in difficult situations, building a bridge for them to higher education, we can utilize the existing community college system to foster significant social change. There are over 1,200 colleges in communities nationwide. If we can harness those colleges to full advantage, we can make a difference. Prisons will never harvest the potential of these young adults, but meaningful and relevant experiences in higher education can transform communities of poverty.

*Diego Navarro is a member of Santa Cruz Meeting in California. This article is based on a talk he gave at the Friends Association on Higher Education (FAHE) annual conference in 2009. Many thanks to FAHE for sharing the video!*