



On My Way to Success

Paolo Castelo's College Journey

My name is Paolo Castelo and I'm an international student currently attending North Hennepin Community College. This is my story...

Twelve years ago, I formulated my dream: To become an aerospace engineer and design all sorts of planes, from commercial aircraft to fierce fighter jets. This career was not offered in my South American home country of Peru, so I set out to study in the United States.

It took me a year to prepare. I worked with an EducationUSA advisor in the city of Arequipa, Peru, took my SAT and TOEFL tests, and applied at several universities in hopes of receiving a full scholarship. I was accepted by a few

institutions, and some even provided partial financial aid, but I was still unable to afford the balance.

Bummed by the result, my advisor suggested I consider community colleges. He explained that they are considerably more affordable (currently about \$180 per credit at NHCC, compared to the \$500 to \$1,000 range at four-year universities), and that my courses could transfer toward a bachelor's degree at four-year universities.

Furthermore, my aunt agreed to invest in my future by funding my first two years at a community college. That sealed the deal. After securing my F-1 visa, I decided to move to Minnesota, since I had friends there who could help me with housing. Within two weeks, I got settled in, obtained international student medical insurance, bought a cheap but decent laptop, and enrolled at North Hennepin Community College.

I was amazed by the entirely new experience. I found that everyone in the college – instructors, advisors, staff, and fellow students – were happy and willing to help me succeed.

I also met a great new friend, Julie Bruns. Julie and her mother have since become my host family. Julie encouraged me to join Phi Theta Kappa, which turned out to be a huge part of my community college experience.

Phi Theta Kappa is the oldest and largest international honor society for two-year colleges. I've had the opportunity to participate in the society's annual convention in Seattle (organizing a flash mob there), and



Castelo as a child with his father at Rodríguez Ballón International Airport in Arequipa, Peru

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currently serve as president for the NHCC chapter. These experiences taught me the importance of positive leadership and influence.

My first year at NHCC was great. I took a difficult course load, but maintained a 4.0 GPA. I secured a work-study position in the Records and Registration office to earn extra money, and received scholarships from the NHCC Foundation to help with tuition, books, and other expenses. Indeed, there were burdens, like not having a car, but the welcoming atmosphere made things more pleasant. College could have been a lonely place for someone from a foreign country.

In my second year, I started to worry about what I was going to do next. I needed to figure out how I would pay for college when I transfer. This anxiety, coupled with my academic and work schedules, felt overwhelming.

There were times I wanted to go back home to Peru. However, my friends, co-workers, instructors, advisors, and family were there to encourage me. They reminded me that this was not

only my dream I was pursuing, but also theirs. I had come too far to give up. I couldn't let them, or myself, down!

I focused my attention on applying for scholarships. Taking advantage of Phi Theta Kappa's member-exclusive benefits, I applied at several four-year universities. I received a couple of offers, but accepted a \$13,000 Phi Theta Kappa transfer scholarship at St. Mary's University in Texas.

Soon I'll be finishing my A.A. degree at NHCC, and then I'll be starting my bachelor's degree in engineering, and eventually a master's degree in aerospace.

With faith and courage, I am determined to make my dreams come true. That's what my family taught me and what I have learned at NHCC.

For more information about NHCC and its programs, visit www.nhcc.edu.

