

Bridgeton ACE Students Excel in Their First Year As Engineering Students

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Juan Vera, left, and Yael Garci were given the Tonielli Scholarship Award for their work in Rowan University's Engineering program and for establishing the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers program.

GLASSBORO, N.J. – It's finals week at Rowan University and Juan Vera and Yael Garcia are in the midst of studying. The friends—since they were both sophomores at Bridgeton High School—have had quite a standout year as freshmen engineering students.

Not only did they perform outstandingly this year, according to their professors, they were instrumental in helping to establish the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) program at Rowan.

In recognition of their success, they have recently been awarded the Tonielli Scholarship Award.

"This is one of the highest recognitions of excellence awarded to freshmen engineering students at Rowan University," according to Rowan University engineering professor Steve Fernandez.

"These are two students from Bridgeton High School who not only were able to graduate and go to college, but they went into an engineering program that is pretty tough," adds Fernandez. "...they have excelled and were selected to receive an award that recognizes them as being two of the most outstanding freshmen that we had this year. Out of like 350 freshmen, they were the only two to get this scholarship award...."

Fernandez notes that both students were mentored while in high school through the Millville-based ACE program.

"Key in their success was the preparation and guidance they received from Larry Merighi through the Architecture, Construction Management, and Engineering [ACE] program in Millville," says Fernandez. "I think that program has had a tremendous impact on getting [high school] students prepared for going to a place like Rowan."

Vera, 18, says the ACE mentoring program was something he initially didn't think he'd be able to be

able to be a part of.

"One of our teachers sophomore year told us about ACE, but we didn't have any transportation," says Vera. "So, we sort of just pushed it aside. But when my friend re-introduced it to me in junior year, I was more interested in it because I actually had transportation available."

"I joined in my senior year of high school," says Garcia, 17. "ACE was a lot of teamwork, which at first was kind of weird, because it wasn't what I expected. But when I came to college, teamwork really [was] a big part of most of the projects we did."

Garcia says the last project he worked on this past semester was a success because of the strong teamwork among students.

"And I owe ACE a lot for that," he says. "There were a lot of team-based projects and I'd say they were all successful just because ACE taught me how to work well with others."

Vera agrees: "The benefits of ACE are building teamwork, learning how to work in a collaborative environment, and, most importantly, getting out of your comfort zone—going above and beyond your curriculum in high school," he says.

"I think [ACE has] been a real big edge for them," adds Fernandez. "I think that program in particular is doing a lot to prepare high school students for college. And if you talk to Larry, it's like, these are two students from this year who have been examples of success, but he can point to many other students who have gone on [to other schools]."

Fernandez says he'd like to see ACE and Rowan collaborate more in the future: "Have our students...interact with some of the [younger] students, maybe do some projects with them, and develop a stronger relationship so that Rowan is on their radar," he says.

Regarding the establishment of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) program at Rowan, Vera and Garcia say they initially started it to serve as a network for freshmen engineers.

"I guess it really started last semester," says Vera. "We wanted more people with Hispanic heritage to come together, to form sort of a support group for everyone. Because usually we have the same types of challenges—like we're the first in our family to go to college—so it's good to have a support group that we can rely on."

Adds Garcia: "I hope that we can inspire other students. Earlier in the semester we went back to ACE to give a presentation to the students. So, I'm hoping we can do more things like that. Because when students see an engineer who looks like them, and who came from a similar background, it gives them the idea that they can do it too."

Vera agrees, adding: "I definitely want the club to expand. I want to see it have more members, not necessarily Hispanic people, but people from all backgrounds, to see how united we are in this university. And I would like to go and talk to more youth groups to get them more interested in engineering."

As to why they were selected for the scholarship award, Vera says, "I guess we both are striving for success. We both come from very humble backgrounds; we want to make the most out of [this opportunity]."

"I'm excited just to be here," says Garcia. "And I really want to make the most of it. I think that rubbed off on our professors, like 'Hey, these students actually have a passion for engineering; they want to be here. They show up to class every day, they try their hardest.' So, I think it's just people recognizing how much we love what we do."

Rowan engineering professor Katie Barillas adds: "They are very dedicated students. They come to every meeting regardless of what they have going on... "They're so dedicated to their education and I think they really value it..."

"There are some students who will do what it takes to get a good grade, but with them, they excel because they want to do the best that they can do," says Fernandez. "That's what we want in engineers. We want someone who's not just going to be satisfied with an A grade, but who's going to strive for the best and keep on going back and thinking about how to make it even better. That's what I've seen with them..."

"I've actually asked them to help out with the summer program because I saw how dedicated they are at the meetings," adds Barillas. "And you don't always see that kind of dedication... [Most students] just care about the grade or their GPA."

"And that's what distinguishes them from a lot of other students—that drive," says Fernandez.

"And as they go on I think they'll see that what really distinguishes engineers is when they can demonstrate that they have integrity, that they have drive and vision. And they've already demonstrated that. I don't know if they got that from ACE or if it's just their own personalities, but they really work to be as good as they can be."

After his last final exam, Vera is off to China for two weeks as part of one of his classes—Global Engineering.

"Our main focus is to learn about the cultures of different countries, which we can use to make more informed decisions on the projects that we potentially do," says Vera. "It gives us a wider scope of the outer world so that you're not only an American engineer, but a global competent engineer. That's the main focus of the course."

Fernandez thinks the two friends' futures look bright.

"We hope that they will continue to excel and win awards and get really great positions as interns, and jobs and whatever else they want to do," he says.

"I think they have a lot of options open to them. Bright futures."