

Carolina Vela

Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholar Class of 2013

Studying Biology at the University of Texas Brownsville

Spent a semester abroad at Central Queensland University at Rock Hampton in Australia

In elementary school, Carolina was a self-described nerd. “I used to practice writing for the SATs, even though I didn’t know what they were,” she said. In elementary school, she penned a neighborhood newspaper and convinced her principal to let her form a student council. Naturally, she was elected president.

Carolina was and still is a bookworm and is fascinated by history, but she also loves science. Her interest sprang from the basic science kits filled with soil and worms her classmates were given in grade school. She then began dissecting larger critters. While she was initially squeamish about animals and insects, she is confident inside the lab. “I like having rules and a set process.”

As a student at the Math and Science Academy in Brownsville, Carolina began college at age 16, while simultaneously completing her junior and senior year of high school.

She applied for the Alliance/Merck *Ciencia* Scholars program after a representative spoke about the program at her school. She was thrilled to be chosen as a scholar.

Carolina is currently a senior at the University of Texas at Brownsville studying biology. This past semester, she studied at Central Queensland University at Rock Hampton in Australia. Being away from home for the first time allowed her to feel independent, to meet new people and to explore life outside of Brownsville’s bubble.

Initially, Carolina planned to go directly to dental school after college, but because of bureaucratic red tape—she was too young and had taken too many credits—she wasn’t able to apply as an early decision applicant. “You have your plans and you think this is your future and then... you get sidetracked,” she said.

Carolina will instead earn another bachelor’s degree and her masters in public health, before applying to dental school. She’s excited to learn more about public health issues. One day she hopes to open her own practice to serve her community.

Her advice for future scholars is “don’t be afraid of being the nerd.” She was bullied a lot because she loves learning. “If I had been a different person, I would have just crumbled,” she said. But Carolina learned not to care what other people thought of her. “If I look at where I am now, that kind of stuff doesn’t matter anymore.”