

Jorge Haddock

Bridging the Gap

Dr. Jorge Haddock and his family often joke that the first complete sentence out of his mouth as a toddler was, "I'm going to be an engineer."

True to his word, he never lost sight of that dream—until a passion for the humanities and social sciences, as well as a broken heart in his sophomore year of college, threw him from the track he had always envisioned for himself. For a time, he questioned his dream of becoming an engineer.

The following year, however, Jorge traveled from his home island of Puerto Rico to New York City for the first time at the invitation of a friend and experienced the moment that would define the rest of his life. Looking at the Brooklyn Bridge, the first steel-wire suspension bridge that has allowed millions upon millions of travelers to cross the East River since its completion in 1883, Jorge felt something inside him click. "I was reminded that that magnificent bridge was built by engineers, and I was reminded of my dream," he relays. "I knew I needed to restart my life right away, so I cut my vacation short by a week. I went back home, and my life was never the same."

With that newfound sense of resolve, Jorge threw himself into the pursuit of his dream with more dedication than ever before. It was enough to bridge the gap of the time he had lost, propelling him through graduation and later to earn his masters at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the school where John A. Roebling, creator of the wire rope suspension design of the Brooklyn Bridge, received his own engineering training. Now the Dean of the School of Management at George Mason University in Northern Virginia, Jorge remembers the bridge as a symbol of the struggle he overcame, and of those struggles he strives to help others overcome as well.

"I think most people pursue a career in education because they're passionate about other people's success," he says today. "Seeing others succeed makes people like me thrive." Under his leadership, George Mason's School of Management has advanced its reputation of excellence in teaching, scholarship, research, and service. Through its programs, students receive top-notch education in the classroom, and co-curricular and extracurricular activities like internships, professional clubs, business plan competitions, and business trips abroad that complement their coursework in marketing, accounting, finance, information systems and operations management, and general management at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. What's more, the school's approach is global in scope and vision, with students from over a hundred countries represented in the student body of 4,500. Faculty, administrators, and students strive not only to produce the highest quality research and scholarship to advance the academic community, but also to participate in service that betters the community at large.

Prior to Jorge's arrival in 2009, Dean Richard Klimoski had helped the school to grow as the demand for business education at the undergraduate and graduate levels lent it an international reputation. After his tenure, the school was looking for new energy and new ideas, and Jorge had the experience and skills to meet its five goals of improving its rankings, increasing the research output of its faculty, hiring more research-oriented faculty members, improving the student experience at all levels, and increasing its reputation through centers of excellence. "I have always been known as student-centered," Jorge affirms. "I've also generated a lot of research myself through my career and have had success in bringing that focus to institutions through my



leadership, so it was a good fit."

When Jorge came onboard as Dean, the school's undergraduate programs were ranked 88 out of 1,700 business programs in the U.S. and 13,000 programs globally. Today, after only three years of Jorge's leadership, that ranking has risen 16 spots to 72. Additionally, the school's graduate programs were not ranked at all when he arrived. Now, its part-time MBA and online MBA are both ranked at number 59. Their professors receive their doctorates from the best institutions worldwide, and the strong reputation of its faculty has allowed the school to achieve a local, national, and even global renown.

Jorge's success today seems so solid that it's hard to imagine him in another environment, but growing up in a lower middle-class household in Caguas, Puerto Rico, his future was anything but certain. His parents divorced when he was four, so he and his sisters were raised primarily by their mother, a teacher with steadfast grace and quiet optimism even in the face of hardship. His father was a veteran of the Korean War who held a number of odd jobs, including entrepreneurial ventures, a position at a sugar cane processing plant, and a stint as a salesman.

Some of his father's entrepreneurial spirit rubbed off on the young boy, and when Jorge was ten years old, he began peeling potatoes in the back of the local supermarket with his neighbor to earn a little money. "I loved it!" he recalls. "I loved working." Later, he got a newspaper route. "I was the happiest guy alive," he laughs. Then, when he was thirteen, a law was passed that allowed children to work in order to keep them off the street. With that, he got a job at a men's clothing store, where he sold suits and ties and helped color-coordinate for customers.

Jorge always loved sports, and in both athletics and the classroom, he often found himself a reluctant leader amongst his peers. In high school, his sister wanted to play basketball, but the team needed a coach. He volunteered and ended up leading the team to win the state championship. "I think it was natural for me to lead because, for me, there's a big difference between leadership and control," he remarks. "When you're controlling, you tend to play smaller games because you can't control a big game. Leaders, then, tend to play bigger games because it's about a purpose that's bigger than him or her. For me, it's always been about trying to see people

in their greatness—in their strengths, and not their weaknesses. That's why, when they needed someone to lead, I was often chosen."

Like many children, Jorge was deeply influenced by his mother, but it was not a disciplinarian or chiding nature that compelled him to seek success in life. Rather, it was her grace, strength, and enduring love. "Studies show that the most significant factor for kids to be successful in college is the level of education of their mothers," he remarks. "My mom got a masters degree at a time when few women did, but that isn't why I was so committed to succeeding. Rather, it was that I didn't have the heart to fail her."

Jorge was also profoundly impacted by his grandparents and two uncles, who were very present in his life after the divorce of his parents. "My grandfather was a waiter but still managed to send three children to college," he says. "Perhaps for the first time in history, people are now questioning the value of a college education, but it's why I'm here today." He's also here today because one uncle, an engineer, served as a role model and taught by example, while another uncle, an accountant, always went out of his way to find teaching moments for Jorge as a boy. The influence of these strong adults was clearly at play when, in ninth grade, Jorge's unwavering dream of becoming an engineer gained deeper nuance as he realized he felt drawn toward teaching as well. He decided he'd become an engineer and then do pro-bono teaching at a high school, enjoying the best of both worlds. Later, however, he decided a better route would be becoming an engineering professor.

The University of Puerto Rico is notorious for its low acceptance rate, and the Haddock family couldn't afford the more costly alternatives, so Jorge's mother always impressed upon him the importance of working hard with his future in mind. It was also the only university with an engineering program, so it was his only chance. He earned a 4.0 through high school and scored in the ninety-ninth percentile on his standardized tests, and his tenacity paid off. He was admitted to the University of Puerto Rico, where he also served as the assistant women's basketball coach.

Jorge struggled initially in college because the public schools had failed to prepare him well for the challenges of higher education, but he earned a 3.3 for his first semester and showed he

had what it took. His second year was a struggle, but by his third year, his discipline and work ethic were unleashed at full force, and he began to scale the peak toward the potential that was always latent within him. “I decided I would be like a stake in the ground—nothing could move me from my commitment,” he remembers. “I was extremely organized, to the point that my friends would study off of my notebooks instead of the actual textbooks. I would go to sleep at 10:30 at night when everyone else was starting to study, and I’d get up at 6:00 AM even if I didn’t have class. Success was about staying with my system even when everyone else was at a different wavelength.”

Thanks to his systematic discipline, Jorge earned enough credits to graduate from his five-year program a semester early, but thanks to divine intervention or the fact that it didn’t make sense to start his graduate studies in the spring, he stayed at the University of Puerto Rico to kill time by taking a few more classes. It was that February that he met Maria, the beautiful second-year student that would become his wife of 33 years and counting.

After earning his masters from Rensselaer and then his doctorate from Purdue University, Jorge returned to the University of Puerto Rico briefly to teach but found that he missed the research culture of the universities state side. After having their first child, Jorge and Maria faced the difficult choice of moving back to the Mainland. They lived down the street from Maria’s parents at the time, and their daughter was the family’s only grandchild, but the couple made the hard decision to leave and remained pillars of support for one another through the hard transition.

Jorge landed a position at Clemson University, and then went on to spend two decades as a tenured, full professor at Rensselaer, pushing the envelope of his abilities to be the best teacher he could be for the best students he could ask for. Through this period, he initially focused in operations research with mathematical models and optimization—an inherently interdisciplinary field that led him to naturally transition over to management later on at Rensselaer. “During that time, it was hard for assistant professors to get tenure, and many came to me for mentorship,” he recalls. “I was able to help them, which led me to the realization that I could expand my impact by teaching those that taught students, thereby

having a compounding effect. Thus, I became an educator because I’m committed to the success of not only my students, but also my colleagues.”

Jorge enjoyed the teaching and research he was doing so immensely that he hesitated when Rensselaer offered him the position of Associate Dean. He had started a modest consulting company as well and loved the freedom of his current lifestyle, but decided to test the waters of the offer, loving the experience so much that he served in that capacity for two years. He then transitioned to the University of Richmond to serve as the Dean of the School of Business for four years before accepting the position at George Mason.

Through the evolution of his career, Jorge’s leadership philosophy has grown deeply perceptive of the line that separates ego from vision. “When you find yourself in a leadership position, it’s important to remember what guides you,” he stresses. “We talk about the values of integrity and honesty, but we’re also guided in daily life by our egos—our modes of survival. Everyone survives differently, and most of the time we’re guided by the ego, but effective leaders tend to be the ones that are guided by a purpose and a vision. They’re able to distinguish between *what I like to do* versus *what I have to do*. Theoretically, it sounds simple enough to discern between your ego and your vision, but when you’ve got a board, customers, employees, investors, and competition all threatening your survival, it can be very hard. The key is to come together to find a common sense of purpose and to create something bigger than ourselves that can serve others, not the ego.”

Quick to espouse the importance of keeping one’s guiding vision at the forefront of the mind, Jorge never loses sight of the fact that everything he does is for the well-being of his students. At each institution he’s served, he has been a constant reminder of this guiding principle. Indeed, while Jorge counts his family as his greatest success, his legacy extends to each and every student he’s touched, whether directly or indirectly. Though he and Maria do some anonymous service work, and though he has served on the Chamber of Commerce and on several nonprofit boards, Jorge still dedicates the vast majority of his time to serving the profession simply because it’s for the good of the university and, ultimately, the students.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Jorge reminds students that life is about pursuing your passion and your dream while keeping your mind on your principles. "That's nothing novel or earth-shattering, but it's important," he says. "Be true to yourself. Also, don't assume that you deserve anything. Love and respect should be earned so that it is truly valued. We begin life with nothing and leave with nothing, and in between we should have what we earn."

Today, when he tries to put his finger on the important influences that have shaped his life along the way, Jorge finds himself almost speechless. "There have been so many," he says. "So many great professors, department chairs, deans, presidents, colleagues, mentors, and role models that helped bridge the gap from who I was to who I became. It is for them, and for all those students today hoping to reach their own potential, that I work to bring the best designs, the strongest materials, and the biggest dreams to the

table, so that each young person can find themselves on a Brooklyn Bridge of their own and wake up to the future they know they can attain."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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