Camila Ibarra - Common App and Rice questions (2026-27, Regular Decision)

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Fictional applicant written for this sample. The person, her school and the small organisations below are invented.

Profile

- Lives with mother (dental office receptionist), stepfather (HVAC technician) and brother Mateo (age 9).
- First in family to apply to a four-year residential university; mother earned an associate degree at El Paso Community College.
- Languages: English and Spanish (both native).
- Intended major: Civil and Environmental Engineering. Residential college preference: none stated.

Grades and tests

- Franklin Heights High School, El Paso, Texas (public, ~2,100 students). Class of 2027.
- GPA 3.84 unweighted, 4.41 weighted. Rank 31 of 512.
- Sophomore year: C+ in Honors Chemistry, fall semester (missed three weeks after a concussion in club soccer; raised to A- in spring).
- Senior courses: AP Calculus BC, AP Physics C: Mechanics, AP Environmental Science, AP English Literature, AP Government/Economics, Engineering Design (CTE).
- Earlier APs: AP Calculus AB (4), AP Physics 1 (3), AP US History (4), AP English Language (4), AP Spanish Language (5).
- SAT 1390 (Evidence-Based Reading and Writing 670, Math 720), submitted.

Activities

1. **Counter and register, Paletería Dos Volcanes** (grades 10-12, 14 hrs/wk, paid). Neighborhood ice-pop and snack shop. Opens Saturdays alone; built a Google Sheet that tracks which flavors sell by temperature, so the owner now makes 20% fewer mango paletas on cool days.
2. **Backyard greywater system, independent project** (grades 11-12, ~3 hrs/wk). Routed the washing-machine drain to six mulch basins under the family's fig and pomegranate trees. Version 1 (Mar 2025) clogged and overflowed in a week; version 2 added a lint filter and wider basins. Compared 12 months of El Paso Water bills: about 11% less water.

3. **Science Olympiad, Water Quality and Mission Possible events** (grades 9-12, 5 hrs/wk in season). Co-captain senior year. 4th place, Water Quality, regional tournament (2026).
4. **Volunteer, Sun City Trail Keepers** (grades 10-12, 2 Saturdays/month). Builds rock check dams and drainage dips on Franklin Mountains trails; crew lead for 6 teens since spring 2026.
5. **Violin, Mariachi Los Halcones (school ensemble)** (grades 9-12, 6 hrs/wk). Plays quinceañeras and the Fiesta de las Flores; second violin, never first.
6. **Borderland STEM Bridge** (summer 2025, 2 weeks, hosted at UTEP). Built and tested a sand-and-charcoal filter with a team of four; measured turbidity before and after.
7. **Family responsibilities** (grades 9-12, ~10 hrs/wk). Walks Mateo home from school, homework help, dinner on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
8. **Club soccer, El Paso youth league** (grades 9-10). Center back; stopped after the concussion.

Honors

- Science Olympiad regional medal, Water Quality, 4th place (2026)
- AP Scholar (2025)
- Franklin Heights Engineering Design student of the semester (fall 2025)

Personal essay (prompt: a problem you'd like to solve)

The first time I watered my mother's fig tree with our laundry, I flooded the backyard.

I had read that in El Paso a washing machine uses around 30 gallons a load, and that all of it goes down the drain while people pay to water their yards. We get about nine inches of rain a year. Our fig tree was dropping leaves every July. It seemed obvious: send the laundry water to the tree.

My stepfather, who fixes air conditioners for a living and owns more fittings than anyone needs, helped me run a hose from the machine's drain through the wall. I dug two basins and filled them with mulch. For six days it worked. On the seventh, lint had clogged the hose, the water backed up, and my mother found a puddle the size of a car under the clothesline and Mateo's soccer cleats floating in it.

I wanted to give up, mostly from embarrassment. Instead I read. I found the Texas rules on greywater, which I had not checked first, and learned I was legally fine but technically lazy. I learned that soil absorbs water at a rate you can measure, so I measured ours with a coffee can and a stopwatch: about half an inch an hour, slower than I'd assumed. I needed more area, not deeper holes. Version two had a lint filter made from a nylon stocking and a PVC union, six basins instead of two, and a valve to send water back to the sewer when we use bleach.

That was a year and a half ago. The fig tree has fruit. Our water bills over twelve months were about 11% lower than the year before, which is less than I bragged to my friends it would be.

What stays with me is not the savings. It is that the system failed exactly where I didn't look: at the boring part, the filter, not the clever part. At the paletería I see the same thing. Nobody notices the freezer until it stops working. I want to be an engineer who notices the freezer. El Paso imports and desalinates water and pumps it uphill; Houston, where Rice is, has the opposite problem and too much

of it. I want to learn how cities move water, where it fails, and how to design the dull parts so they don't.

Rice questions

Why are you drawn to Civil and Environmental Engineering? (150 words) My city lives on a river that is sometimes dry. I grew up hearing my grandfather talk about the Rio Grande when it ran all year, and I've seen El Paso's desalination plant from the highway my whole life without knowing what it did. My greywater project taught me that water engineering is mostly plumbing, soil and patience, and I liked that more than I expected. In AP Environmental Science this year we did a groundwater unit on the Hueco Bolson aquifer, and I stayed after class twice to argue with Ms. Duran about whether El Paso should pay for more desalination. I want the math and fluid mechanics to back up my opinions. Long term, I'd like to work for a water utility in the Southwest and earn a Professional Engineer license.

What elements of the Rice experience appeal to you? (150 words) My cousin Valeria is a nurse in Houston, and on a visit in 2024 we walked Rice's campus because she said the oak trees were worth it. Then I learned that Houston floods and El Paso dries out, and that Rice studies both. I attended a virtual information session and read about NEWT, the research center working on water treatment, and about the Oshman Engineering Design Kitchen, where first-years build real things. I am better at building than at tests, and my transcript shows it. Small classes matter to me because my best learning happened when Ms. Duran had time to argue with me. I also like that a Rice student is not choosing between engineering and the rest of life; I want to keep playing violin.

Rice's residential colleges: what life perspectives would you contribute? (500 words) I am the person who opens the store. Every Saturday at Dos Volcanes I unlock at 9, check the freezer temperatures, count the drawer and turn on the radio to the Juárez station Doña Lupe likes. By the time she arrives, the place is ready. My friends say I'm the one who remembers the charger and the extension cord; my teachers would probably say I ask too many questions after the bell.

In a residential college, I'd bring that: the habit of setting things up so other people can enjoy them. I'd want to join the college's kitchen or study-break crew and teach people to make paletas with a freezer and popsicle molds. I'd bring a violin to anything that needs music.

I'd also bring the border. I grew up crossing into Juárez to see my grandmother, and I know what it is to live in two languages in one afternoon. I'm nervous about being far from my family and about how hard my first physics exam will be. I'd like a college where older students tell freshmen where the hard parts are.

Rice Box (image description): A photo of my lint filter from version two, nylon stocking and PVC, gray and ugly, labeled in Sharpie: 'the part I forgot.'

Last book read: Cadillac Desert by Marc Reisner, for my AP Environmental Science project on the Colorado River.