

OCTOBER 22, 2007

IN DEPTH

By Sophia Asare

Online Extra: Putting College Within Reach for Many

Nonprofit programs provide intensive admissions-prep services for promising kids from low-income backgrounds

Eileen Huang sounds like a typical high-achieving student at one of the nation's top universities. Now in her second year at Yale, Huang enjoys her courses—philosophy and psychology are among her favorite subjects—and extracurricular pursuits that include the Chinese American Students Assn. and ballroom dancing. It's hard to believe that the thriving young student who graduated third in her high school class once thought a school like Yale was beyond her reach. The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Huang grew up in Highland Park, a working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles. "I imagined going to a school like Yale, but you just don't know if you can with your financial situation," she says.

Many other bright and capable students from low-income backgrounds aren't making it to the country's elite universities. According to a 2004 study by the Century Foundation, only 3% of students in the poorest socioeconomic quartile attend the nation's most selective 146 colleges, compared with 74% from the richest quartile. While affordability is a significant factor, so is a dearth of college counseling resources. These students often come from large, overcrowded public high schools where overwhelmed counselors have little time to devote to college searches and applications, never mind the raw material—such as SAT scores or extracurricular résumés—that go into them. Because many of these students are the first in their families to consider attending college, they're unable to turn to their parents for guidance, either. As a result, many highly qualified students just don't know that opportunities such as Yale exist for them.

PERSONALIZED ASSISTANCE. Harley Frankel, founder of College Match, is trying to change that. College Match is one of a growing number of intensive, nonprofit college preparation programs for low-income students. The National College Access Network, a nonprofit comprising such college preparation services, now counts 237 programs from 44 states. Frankel, who worked in education policy in Washington for a decade, started College Match in 2002. The program selects about 50 low-income high school sophomores in the Los Angeles area each year—Huang was a College Match alum—and provides them with a wide range of personalized college preparation services. It offers extensive SAT prep tutoring, sponsors a tour of several elite private colleges on the East coast, assists with college applications and essays, and provides financial aid consulting. Of the 46 seniors involved with the program who graduated last summer, 41% were accepted to Ivy League or Ivy equivalent universities.

College prep programs for disadvantaged students are not new. But several things set this crop apart. These programs take a hands-on approach, becoming deeply invested in their students' lives. For example, when Antonio Ingram scored poorly on the math section of the SAT, College Match hired a one-on-one tutor to supplement his regular SAT prep classes. Ingram will attend Yale University this fall. The programs are also highly selective. Ingram attends one of the largest high schools in Los Angeles. Yet only five students out of his graduating senior class of 400 were chosen by College Match.

RETENTION ISSUE. These organizations don't just help students get into college. They also help them stay there. Among low-income students, retention is a serious issue. In 2001, the National Center for Education Statistics found that nearly 70% of students whose parents earned \$75,000 or more completed a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with

approximately 44% of students whose families earned less than \$25,000. The programs offer graduates a support network. Admission Possible, a program in Minnesota, has an alumni coordinator who stays in touch with students at college and provides assistance. College Match helped Ingram negotiate a financial-aid package with Yale. It also hosts an annual holiday party for students who return to L.A. over winter break.

While organizations such as College Match and Admission Possible aren't able to help more than a tiny fraction of students in their regions each year, they do appear to be having an impact on their communities. Ingram says that while some of his friends weren't picked by College Match, the experience nonetheless motivated them to apply to the private four-year colleges they now attend. "It has a ripple effect," he says.

The McGraw-Hill Companies

Copyright 2000- 2007 by The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.
All rights reserved.