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A Gentle Shove in the Direction of College

To improve the college-going rate of low-income students, a national program must first help them see the possibilities

BY BEN GOSE

THORNTON, COLO. ONE RECENT EVENING Andrea Jiminez, a senior at Skyview High School in this Denver suburb, got a call from a recruiter at the University of Denver offering her provisional admission. If a required on-campus interview went well, the recruiter promised, she would be admitted. The call startled Ms. Jiminez. She had not even applied to the University of Denver.

"I was like, 'Are you sure it's me you're trying to call?'" she says.

Ms. Jiminez, a Peruvian immigrant with a 3.8 grade-point average, had been thinking that she would attend a community college, or possibly Metropolitan State College of Denver, a public institution with an open-access policy and inexpensive tuition. The private University of Denver, which has a \$37,000 annual sticker price, including room and board, had not crossed her mind. Now Ms. Jiminez and her guidance counselor are trying to cobble together enough financial aid from the university and elsewhere to take advantage of the offer.

The University of Denver and Ms. Jiminez were brought together by College Summit, a national program that tries to improve the college-going rate of students from low-income families. The Washington-based nonprofit group was founded in 1993 on the theory that giving intensive college-transition help to 20 percent of the seniors in high schools with a large number of students from low-income families would lift college-going rates among all students in those graduating classes.

College Summit taps rising seniors whom teachers believe are better than their grades and test scores indicate—often students with grade-point averages below 3.0—for four-day workshops on applying to college. The organization believes that these students, whom it calls "peer leaders," can be influential among their classmates and are more likely to persuade other students to go on to college than are the school's highest achievers.

Propelled by solid results and with diversified financial support, College Summit has established partnerships with high schools and colleges in many cities, including Charleston, W.Va., Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington. As the group has established itself nationally, many experts believe that it has a compelling

model for improving college access. But they caution that many other philanthropies are working with similar students, and few if any of the groups have graded themselves on their most important goal—raising the college-going rate among students who do not receive intensive help.

Most of College Summit's revenue comes from donations and grants—\$4.9-million in the past year. But it has also succeeded in persuading high schools to pay a portion of the program's costs, with schools paying about \$170 to \$200 per student. Colleges are asked to provide facilities for and cover the costs of four-day summer workshops for about 50 rising high-school seniors. To entice colleges to cover that expense—which ranges from \$10,000 to \$20,000—College Summit agrees to give them an early peek at the application portfolios assembled by students participating in College Summit on their campus and others around the country. That's how the University of Denver heard about Ms. Jiminez.

The number of minority students of college-going age is rising rapidly, and admissions officers are generally eager to increase the diversity of their institutions, but rating those students academically can be tricky. After the bidding wars end for the small pool of minority applicants with high standardized-test scores, it can be difficult to sort through the remaining students, many of whom would be the first members of their families to go to college. The applications from those first-generation students often lack the fullness of detail that characterizes applications from wealthier students.

College Summit sells itself as a way to help colleges get the additional information they need to reach their diversity goals.

"What we provide probably approximates what a standard, well-supported, middle-class application looks like," says J. B. Schramm, College Summit's founder and chief executive officer. "But it is leagues beyond a routine application from a first-generation student."

A BOX OF TISSUES

The summer workshops are designed to relieve students of any preconceived notions about what is possible for them after high school, and to elicit application essays compelling enough to move admis-

sions deans to action. "Rap leaders"—typically, college students who have themselves been through the program—get the discussion started with their own inspirational stories, and writing coaches—adult volunteers from the community—help the students craft their essays. Several admissions deans say the banquet held at the end of the workshop can be quite moving.

"The last couple of years my wife Marilyn and I both went, and she would take a whole box of tissues," says John Dolan, former dean of admissions at Denver, who left the university a year ago to become president of the Catholic Foundation for the Archdiocese of Denver. "I really don't think most of these kids would go on to college without this program."

Ms. Jiminez, after settling in the United States, attended a College Summit workshop at Regis University, where she wrote an application essay about her fears on the first day of high school. At the end of the workshops, College Summit asks students to sign a document allowing the organization to share their portfolio with its partner colleges.

Ms. Jiminez agreed to this, and College Summit forwarded her portfolio, along with those of dozens of other students, to the University of Denver. The university was provided this opportunity because it sponsored a workshop of its own last summer, at a cost of \$20,000. It's too early to tell if the university will land Ms. Jiminez, but each year it accepts the majority of the 70 or so students that it learns about through College Summit, eventually enrolling 15 to 20 of them.

Cezar Mesquita, the university's director for diversity enrollment, says the partnership is providing a solid return on Denver's investment. "We know that these students are dedicated to going to college," he says, "and that they have the wherewithal to stick with it."

A BROKEN SYSTEM

The roots of College Summit date to Mr. Schramm's own high-school days, at East High School, in inner-city Denver. After graduation he went off to college at Yale University—an outcome that his college-educated parents had foreseen since his birth. But many of his friends whose parents had not attended college didn't go either. "I relied on my parents," he says, "and they

relied on a system in our high school that didn't work."

After earning degrees from Yale and Harvard Divinity School, Mr. Schramm ran an after-school center for teenagers in the basement of a Washington housing project, where he worked with about 60 students per year and tried to get them to go on to college. A handful, the ones with high test scores, would get multiple scholarship offers. Most of the remaining students were also capable of succeeding in college, he says, but few made it.

"I just got frustrated seeing our second-tier students year after year tell me they'd go to college, then graduate from high school, step out our door and go nowhere," Mr. Schramm says. "Six months later I'd pass them on a street corner, and their eyes would be dulled."

College Summit started in that teen center. Its first college workshop, with 35 students, was held at Connecticut College in 1995. This summer the organization will hold 30 workshops, for about 1,300 students, and will work with an additional 3,700 students during the school year. Officials from nine more communities are planning to attend a meeting in Chicago to make their pitch for why College Summit should come to their schools next.

TRAUMA DRAMA

Broader trends affecting college admissions and high-school accountability may help College Summit expand. Several scholars, including William G. Bowen, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, argue that students from low-income families deserve a greater preference in the admissions process at selective institutions. And new technology—like the college-enrollment database maintained by the National Student Clearinghouse—makes it easier for high schools to accurately measure what percentage of their students actually go on to college. (Self-reported data from students is notoriously inflated.)

But College Summit is operating in an increasingly crowded field. Here in Denver, for example, some high schools are served by as many as seven college-preparation programs, including federal programs like Gear Up and Upward Bound, college offerings like the University of Colorado's "Precollegiate" program, and other private programs, like the Daniels Fund College Prep and Scholarship Program, which is backed by a foundation with a billion-dollar endowment.

College-access programs are, naturally, judged by their ability to help students go on to college. College Summit sends 79 percent of the students who attend its workshops, known as "peer leaders," to college. The national college-going rate for low-income students is 46 percent.

Colleges judge the program on its ability to find them students they would not otherwise know about, students who bring racial and socioeconomic diversity to their campuses. Walter Robinson, the new director of undergraduate admissions at the University

of California at Berkeley, joined with College Summit in his previous position, as dean of admissions at the University of Florida, after Florida's governor, Jeb Bush, barred state institutions from using affirmative action.

"We enriched our applicant pool with first-generation, low-income students, many of whom happened to be underrepresented minority students," Mr. Robinson says.

He now wants Berkeley to hold a College Summit workshop, something it has never done. Like the University of Florida, Berkeley is prohibited from considering race in the admissions process.

Several private institutions, meanwhile, have agreed to hold College Summit workshops to gain greater visibility in high schools that serve students from low-income, mostly minority, families.

Regis has held workshops on its campus since 1998, at a total cost of more than \$75,000, and has just one student to show for it—a woman who enrolled last fall. Many would-be students simply could not afford the private Jesuit institution. But Victor L. Davolt, admissions director at Regis, notes that it is in the midst of a capital campaign, and that part of the money will be used to sharply increase the amount of aid the university can offer to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. "In the future, College Summit could have a fairly significant impact on the students who are enrolling at Regis," he says.

Not everyone raves about College Summit. An early partnership with the University of Colorado at Boulder fizzled in 1999. "It wasn't providing a population that we weren't able to get otherwise," says Barbara L. Schneider, executive director of enrollment management. "And there was an awful lot of expense and overhead." Mr. Schramm says Boulder enrolled 20 College Summit students in its final year in the program.

Two people interviewed for this article, who asked that their names not be used, out of a reluctance to criticize a worthwhile program, suggested that during the workshops, the rap leaders and writing coaches often go too far—to the point of making students uncomfortable—in trying to elicit "trauma dramas" that might appeal to admissions deans. Mr. Schramm concedes that workshop organizers are instructed to draw out "gold nuggets," but he says the organization's manual specifies that students must be allowed to write about whatever they choose.

"If you actually get to know some of the students, that's their story," says Andrew B. Sison, admissions director of Elmhurst College, a participant in College Summit. "You and I can talk about whether that's strategic or not, but we don't live in those houses."

'LIFEBOATS'

On a recent weekday morning, 15 students in a classroom here at Skyview High School pull out their copies of a thick workbook produced by College Summit. Today's topic is budgeting for college expenses. The stu-

dents, two-thirds of whom are Hispanic, have already read the college-application and financial-aid sections of the book.

These are regular students, not the so-called peer leaders who are tapped by their teachers for the summer workshops. Two years ago College Summit piloted a new approach in eight high schools, working with the entire senior class on the college-application process in weekly classroom meetings. A dozen more schools adopted the "whole school" approach this academic year, including Skyview, which is in its first year working with the organization.

Even though College Summit's theory is that the peer leaders influence other students, the group has not historically measured itself on a schoolwide basis. The 79-percent success rate featured on its Web site refers only to the peer leaders.

Robert Shireman, director of the Institute for College Access and Success and a visiting scholar at Berkeley's Center for Studies in Higher Education, says such small-group measurements pose a problem because they present programs with a perverse incentive to stay away from students who face the greatest challenges in reaching college.

"Every one of these programs is now in a situation where they have to claim 90-percent college-going rates," he says. "It drives some of them to practices that aren't helping. They end up wanting to bring in the students who would do fine anyway."

Mr. Schramm agrees. College Summit is moving toward working with the entire senior class in all participating schools. And as soon as it gets enrollment data back from the National Student Clearinghouse, it will begin publishing that information on its Web site. At Skyview, in Denver, College Summit hopes to raise the college-going rate—now at about 40 percent, although the school does not yet have solid data—by 10 percentage points over three years.

"Small-group college-access programs, if they're successful, are lifeboats," Mr. Schramm says. "We need to fix the ship."

One of the students in the Skyview class, Victor Reyes, says he had intended to go to work after graduation. But the college-application course, called "Connections," has changed his plans. Every student is required to apply to at least one college, even if he or she plans to go into the military or take a job. While some teachers feel that the requirement devalues important careers, like plumbing and carpentry, that don't require a college degree, the process of applying to a college did open Mr. Reyes's eyes to new possibilities.

He also understands that his family financial situation—his father drives a truck, his mother keeps house—should qualify him for financial aid. Now he expects to go to ITT Technical Institute, a nearby proprietary college, to pursue one of its information-technology programs.

"This class has helped me out," Mr. Reyes says. "I had been thinking that I wouldn't be able to afford college." ■