



College Summit helps urban youth aim high

Posted: Aug. 12, 2006 By Gregory Stanford

A fact has landed in the mind of Antonio Rodriguez, 16, and blown it wide open. The bombshell: His formal education doesn't have to end with high school.

Rodriguez sits among five high school students, all seniors this September, who share their awakening about college with grown-ups - philanthropists, educators, elected officials, agency heads and others - as part of a wild, neat, multifaceted program dubbed College Summit.

The aim: To foment a revolution in thinking among inner city teens. To implant in urban youth culture the expectation of higher education.

The program exploits the youths' own networks. And it avoids the easy route: targeting the intellectual elite. Rather, it goes primarily after the "C" students, who, if they were rich, would get into college. Yet this model boasts a record of success.

Begun in Washington, D.C., in 1993, College Summit has spread around the nation. Fast Company magazine selected it last year as one of the top 25 groups that are changing the world.

Its "peer leaders" have a 79% enrollment rate in college (compared with a 46% rate for low-income kids in general) and an 80% retention rate.

Rodriguez admits that college was out of sight and out of mind. He says his school talks about college "just on certain days" and that his parents, who are busy working, never broach the topic.

Jermaine Harris, 17, chimes in: "In my neighborhood, there are a lot of kids my age, and they haven't seen a college application."

This session takes place at Alumni Memorial Union at Marquette University, which is hosting a key piece of the College Summit - an intense four-day workshop for 26 students identified as peer leaders at four Milwaukee high schools. The goal is to turn onto college the teens who set the pace in high school, with the idea that others will follow their lead.

Salvaging the kids should boost Milwaukee, which now lacks the brainpower to be all that it can be. This metropolis must add 5,300 college grads a year until 2020 to climb to

the big-city par, says Deborah McGriff, who has imported the Summit here in behalf of the Milwaukee chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

"This is an economic development issue," she says. "It's not just a post-secondary issue. It's how do you end poverty in the city."

McGriff - executive vice president of the Edison Schools, a for-profit firm that runs schools - is working on the College Summit as a volunteer. She once ran the Detroit school system and was second-in-command of the Milwaukee system.

This is the program's second year in Milwaukee. Last year, it reached about 30 students. Now, it's targeting 200 students at two public high school sites - Pulaski and the small schools at Washington - and at two private schools, Clara Mohammad and the CEO Leadership Academy.

The students will get 36 weekly lessons on applying to college and preparing for life after high school.

Plans call for expansion to 3,000 students. Financing, however, is not yet secured.

McGriff believes every student should get some form of post-secondary education, whether skills training, two-year degrees or four-year colleges. The key is to match the form to a student's talents and desires, she says.

The workshop students bunk in an MU dorm and attend sessions from early morning to late night. They meet with counselors to select colleges. They write applications. And they craft a "personal statement," which may be mandatory or optional in the application process.

Either way, they leave the workshop better writers than when they came. Trained writing coaches spend about a dozen hours with the students, says one such coach, Gerard Robinson, of the Black Alliance for Educational Options. They move from free-writing, putting down thoughts unfettered; to gold-mining, collecting nuggets from the free-writing; and to showing and not telling, also known as expressive writing.

For instance, pressed by Robinson to show, rather than tell what he felt about the death of his cousin, one student went from "felt bad" to "felt sick" to "had a bad taste in my mouth."

"Middle-class parents who've been to college do this," says McGriff, referring to the steps they take to ensure their kids get into college. "Affluent parents do this. They hire private coaches, even after their kids have attended elite private schools.

"I don't think it's fair to expect low-income, first-generation students (the first in their family to go to college) to get this work done with no help."

She's right, of course. And this promising program deserves financial support.