



NEWS

In Seattle, a Firsthand Lesson in College Access

By Anna Weggel December 14, 2007

A program dreamed up by a U. of Washington freshman puts students in the role of admissions counselors at local high schools

Chunda Zeng expected to study for a career in chemistry and physics. But then the freshman at the University of Washington signed up for the Dream Project.

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The program teaches undergraduates at the university about higher-education policy at the same time that they help disadvantaged high-school students apply to college.

And it led Mr. Zeng to trade the laboratory for the lecture hall.

Now he plans to do graduate work in educational policy and leadership, having chosen to major in international studies. He also hopes to land a job on the campus. “I want to be able to contribute to the college and help develop programs,” he says. “I want to stay.”

The Dream Project, which started in 2004, pairs students at the University of Washington with first-generation and low-income students in six Seattle high schools. The college students help the high-schoolers prepare for the SAT, fill out college applications, and apply for scholarships. Unlike many similar programs, the University of Washington’s project is paired with a course on its campus. In the classroom, the college students study issues of social justice, educational opportunity, and socioeconomic mobility.

The experience is transforming some students into aspiring college administrators, says Stanley E. Chernicoff, principal lecturer in the department of earth and space sciences, who is the project’s adviser.

“A remarkable number of them,” he says, “have been diverted into pursuing careers in higher education.”

The program hopes to send a message that the University of Washington is still trying to recruit minority students, nine years after the state’s voters banned the use of racial preferences in public-university admissions. “We’re going into communities saying, ‘We want you and will help you. You have demonstrated that you’re capable of doing it, so here’s how you do it,’” says Mr. Chernicoff.

The project, along with changes in the university’s admissions process, seems to be

paying off. Sixty-five students are involved, working with more than 250 potential applicants at local high schools. Thirty-five freshman are enrolled at Washington after having been counseled through the program.

In the past few years, says Mark A. Emmert, the university's president, freshman classes have been more ethnically and racially diverse. Members of minority groups made up about 36 percent of the undergraduate enrollment this fall, compared with 30 percent in 2001.

"We certainly changed admissions standards, which has had a big impact," Mr. Emmert says. Applicants' essays and personal backgrounds count for more now.

"We aggressively recruit students," he continues. "We follow up on admissions and scholarship-support programs, and programs like the Dream Project have made clear to the community of color that we want them to be part of the university."

One Student's Idea

The Dream Project was founded by a student, Alula Asfaw, who arrived at the University of Washington in 2003. Mr. Asfaw, who is black, says he wondered where everyone who "looked like him" was.

When Mr. Asfaw was 6, his mother brought him from Ethiopia to the United States so he could live in a safer environment and get a better education. Twelve years later, with the help of a volunteer in Upward Bound, a national program that provides college-entrance support, he found himself at Washington.

He considers himself lucky because of the way things turned out: "I knew there wasn't anything particularly special about me that made me deserve to be there."

That led him to start thinking about the difficulties some students have with access to college. He realized that many people on the campus didn't understand those issues. The campus is full of "good-hearted, good-meaning students that grew up in completely different circumstances," he says. "But they come blind to this."

He decided to create a program that would promote access and provide support for underprivileged high-school students who want to attend college. A key part of that program would be teaching college students about barriers that limit access to higher education.

"We're not just a high-school program," says Mr. Asfaw. "With these discussions we have, we look at statistics and we think about our experience in high school and get a different level of understanding."

Students essentially run the program. They manage the budget, do the fund raising, and design and maintain the Web site. Mr. Chernicoff's role, he says, is to make sure the students get academic credit, to give assignments and an occasional speech, then sit back and watch.

Giving Back

The project has become one of the university's major efforts to recruit students from low-income families and those with no college graduates. High-school students who are chosen for the program must be not only academically capable but also motivated to attend college.

"If you start with 1,000 students," says Mr. Chernicoff, "many fall by the wayside, and there's only a narrow stream that end up at college."

The program looks for students who don't know how to apply to college or for financial aid — often because their parents didn't go to college, or because English is not their families' first language.

Because the program encourages college students to volunteer at the same high schools they attended, they find themselves teaching students they shared classes with the previous year, or with whom they still play sports on weekends.

Oscar Castro Jr., who was helped by the Dream Project in high school, started classes at Washington this year, and participates in the program as a mentor. “Most of the high-school students I know, because I went to that school for four years,” he says. “A lot I play baseball with. It gives them extra encouragement, and they know that they've talked to me before, so they trust me.”

Coaching students on their college-admissions essays is the hardest part for him, Mr. Castro says, because many of them have endured extraordinarily difficult lives, and he must convince them that their stories are worth telling. “We find out a lot of things about them, about hardships or struggles that they've gone through,” he says. “You've got to be attentive and help them turn that into something strong that can help them.”

Italiana Hughes, a senior at Renton High School, was struggling with her personal essay. She found it difficult to write about herself. Her friends and a couple of Dream Project members decided to meet outside of school, at a coffee shop, and go through their essays together. “I really didn't have any idea about college,” she says. “Didn't know which ones to go to, what to major in, and that was mainly because my mother and father didn't go. I'm the oldest sibling. I didn't have anybody to look up to.”

But the Dream Project mentors “were there, friendly and nice, and it was really, really easy to talk to them about it,” she says.

Ms. Hughes has been accepted at Liberty University, Northern Arizona University, and Northwest Christian College. She is also applying to the University of Washington, which she favors because the “business school is amazing, and that’s what sold me. And I want to get involved with the Dream Project.”

Cultivating Campus Leaders

For some high-school students helped by the Dream Project, the opportunity to become mentors themselves is a big draw to the University of Washington. Although some are accepted by other institutions, many choose Washington to give something back to their own high schools.

When most students go to college, they get little more than a “handshake, congrats, go do a great job,” says Mr. Chernicoff. But the project allows incoming students to be a part of an organized and supportive group that not only meets regularly for class, volunteering, and social activities but also runs an important part of the university’s outreach beyond the campus.

“This has become the best crucible for leadership on campus,” he says. “It projects an image of the university that there’s a place for students to develop friendships and meaningful connections. It’s a powerful message to kids who are scared stiff to come to a university of this quality.”

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