

Let Talent Shine: Breaking Barriers to Higher Education

By Mary Marks

College Summit helps low-income high school students break a generations-old pattern of failing to pursue a college education. Beyond helping the individual student, this boosts the U.S. economy and helps colleges diversify their student populations in line with the recent Supreme Court ruling on race-based admissions.



Some College Summit graduates return to College Summit to serve as alumni leaders

College Summit strengthens the college-going culture of low-income high schools, focusing on helping mid-tier students from low-income backgrounds — those with Bs and Cs and mediocre SAT scores — successfully apply to college. These students often have great potential to succeed in college, but unlike similar students from middle-class backgrounds they ordinarily don't even try to apply for a college education. Only 33 percent of low-income 1992 high school graduates were enrolled in college after two years, compared to 77 percent of high-income students.

By nearly doubling the rate at which low-income mid-tier students enroll in college, College Summit produces a wealth of talent for colleges that are eager to attract students from diverse backgrounds. Colleges are looking for new ways to recruit diverse student populations after the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling in June involving the University of Michigan's use of race as a factor in college admissions. The ruling requires a holistic review of each student instead of relying on race as a criterion for acceptance.

"As the Supreme Court said in the Michigan case, diversity is a compelling state interest — but it can be achieved only through 'individualized student review'," said J.B. Schramm, founder and chief executive of College Summit. "This is precisely the solution College Summit has been developing for ten years."

The beauty of the College Summit approach is its lack of reliance on affirmative action, an advantage that the U.S. Department of Education recognized when College Summit was the only non-government-affiliated, race-neutral program cited in its 2003 report, "[Race-Neutral Alternatives in Post-Secondary Education: Innovative Approaches to Diversity](#)."

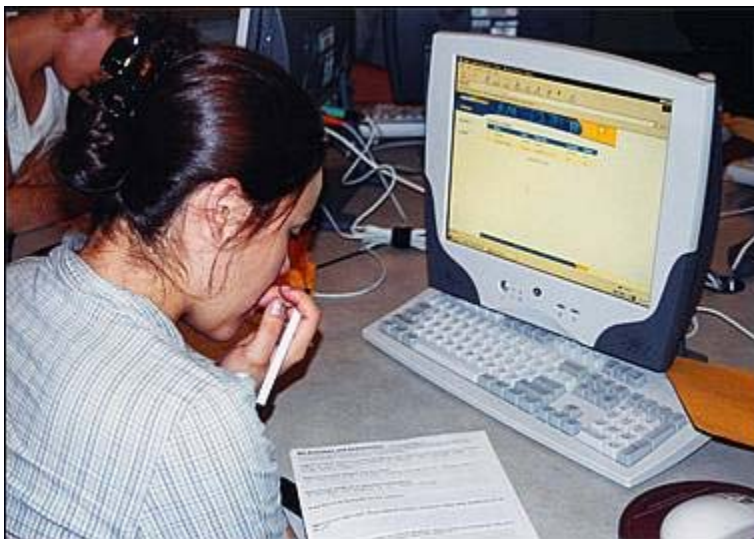


J.B. Schramm

A Story Worth Telling

College Summit enrolls low-income students nominated by their high schools in a four-day intensive college-application workshop during the summer before their senior year. Participants write their college application during the workshop, a considerable hurdle because of the skills and confidence it requires.

The writing curriculum, created by the noted editor Keith Frome, coaches students to focus on the most compelling aspects of their lives, emphasizing unique experience and downplaying grammar. "It's their story," said Dana Malman, who is spending a yearlong post-graduate Princeton fellowship as a community development associate for College Summit. "The best part is having them realize that their story is worth telling."



Students at a College Summit workshop use [CSNET](#), College Summit's online application management system

The essays can be poignant: an Albanian immigrant described the painful lesson she learned about rejecting friends intent on criminal activity; a boy seeking to shun his neighborhood gang culture gave a similar account interlaced with a tense at-bat scene from an important baseball game.

One essay opens with a scene from the applicant's life: *"A sixteen-year-old girl walks down Taos High School hallway with her infant in her arms. Her eyes are fixed straight forward, avoiding the other students' stares. She knows what they are most likely thinking. She ignores the murmurs, and with her beautiful baby boy held close to her chest she steps into room 310 to speak with her first period teacher and pick up her assignments. The classroom quiets when she walks in. Her classmates look*

upon her with pity. The girl picks up her homework and before leaving the classroom, she stops to say hello to me. The young girl is my older sister. She is also my hero."

College Summit participants' essays give concrete examples of their ability to succeed in the face of adversity. Ironically, the burdens that distract students from academic life can be touchstones for character and ingenuity. They help colleges identify promising students beyond the narrow criteria of grades and test scores.

John Dolan, vice chancellor for enrollment at the University of Denver, explains the value of these essays: "We're interested in students . . . that — as we read the applications — didn't have anything going on after school and weren't active in sports. They just didn't appear that active. But then you read the essay, and find they had to take care of three to five siblings after school. They did it well, and they maintained a high GPA. For us, that's the 'aha moment.' That's the kind of student we want here."

The Supreme Court called for "holistic" admissions evaluations, for example "a personal statement, letters of recommendation and an essay describing ways in which the applicant will contribute to the life and diversity of the school." This is "great news in one sense," Schramm said. "Certainly elite colleges have known for centuries . . . that people are complicated.

"You need a lot of data points, not just a test score or GPA. In most U.S. universities and many universities around the world, the main question is: 'What score did you get on this test?'

In the U.S., low-income young people are least likely to have support to produce a portfolio."

Traditionally, those in the middle class, or above, have seen the process of reviewing low-income student college applicants as a "plucking" of the best talent, Schramm said — but they have benefited from an application process that involved a more holistic review of their own talents. "That's the opposite of what we do," he said.

"I believe strongly that the way you energize one's talent is to engage the whole person. There already are structures for two kinds of students to get to college: those who test well, and premier athletes. Systems elsewhere in the world are even more exclusively focused on test-score results, and that means that talent is not getting fully developed."



The College Summit workshop is an intense four-day immersion in completing the college application process

Navigating a Rite of Passage

Many high school students from lower-income homes cannot compete with children who have greater access to counselors, paid coaches and, most significantly, parents who attended college and are familiar with the college application process, Schramm said. He noted that that "D" students from well-off families attend college at the same rate as "A" students from poor precincts.

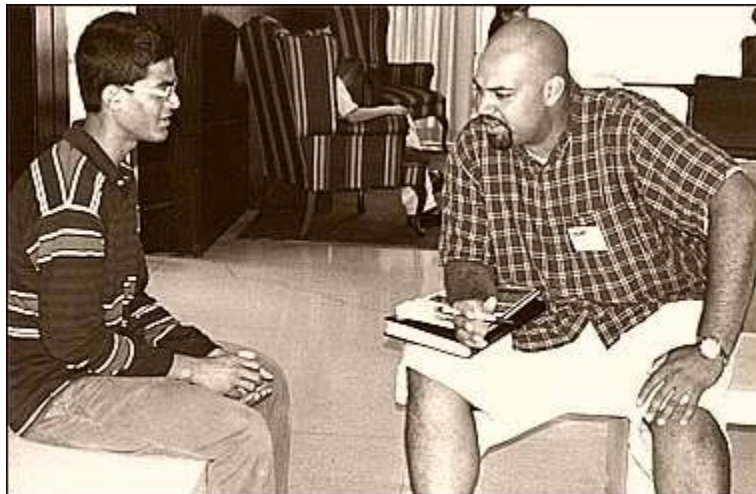
The primary problem is not that students lack ambition, money, or access to decent schools, Schramm said. "When most people think of a gap, they think it's a question of preparation. We certainly argue that K-through-12 reform is critical, but that's not the whole picture."

Rather, College Summit's students lack guidance to help them navigate the maze between high school

and college — a kind of rite of passage that requires a variety of attributes including self-esteem and the ability to promote oneself. Except for the exceedingly privileged, who vie for coveted slots as early as pre-school, getting into college "is the first time you self-advocate," Schramm said.

When he first started College Summit, Schramm observed that low-income students could get discouraged or distracted before they completed the months-long process of applying to colleges even when they received encouragement and counselling. To address this problem, the College Summit format allows 40 students to complete their application process by collapsing it into a four-day workshop, during which they live together on a college campus in an intense, focused atmosphere with plenty of peer support.

During the workshop, students participate in rap sessions where they identify the personal challenges they will face in trying to go to college, and develop strategies to overcome them. They meet one-on-one for an hour with professional college counselors to pick colleges that match them academically, socially, and financially, and to develop concrete next steps to accomplish senior year. They also learn about financial aid, the importance of planning, and the fundamentals of advocacy in "winning" at financial aid.



A College Summit student meets with Obiora "Bo" Menkiti, College Summit chief operations officer

Finally, the students practice interviewing and presenting through role-play. They complete a common application that they can use for more than 250 colleges, using College Summit's online application management tool.

This four-day curriculum is so compelling that coaches from all walks of life sign up to teach it, including former Attorney General Janet Reno, Gerald Reynolds, former assistant secretary for civil rights at the Department of Education, and the award-winning author Debra Dickerson. "It's the power of working together" — writing coaches, teachers, graduate students, young professionals, high-level executives, alumni of past workshops and peers — all focused on individuality, Malman said.

Since 1993, 5,000 low-income students from 14 states have participated in College Summit, and 79 percent have enrolled in college, compared to a national rate of 46 percent for high school graduates at the same income level. Eighty percent of these students have stayed in college — a remarkable rate for almost any group of students but especially those who weren't even expected to enroll.

To help pay for their college expenses, these students have obtained more than \$21 million in college scholarships. This year, 14 high schools in Chicago, Denver, Fresno, Washington, DC and Kanawha County, WV, are launching a College Summit initiative called "Senior Class Model" that serves every senior in a school.

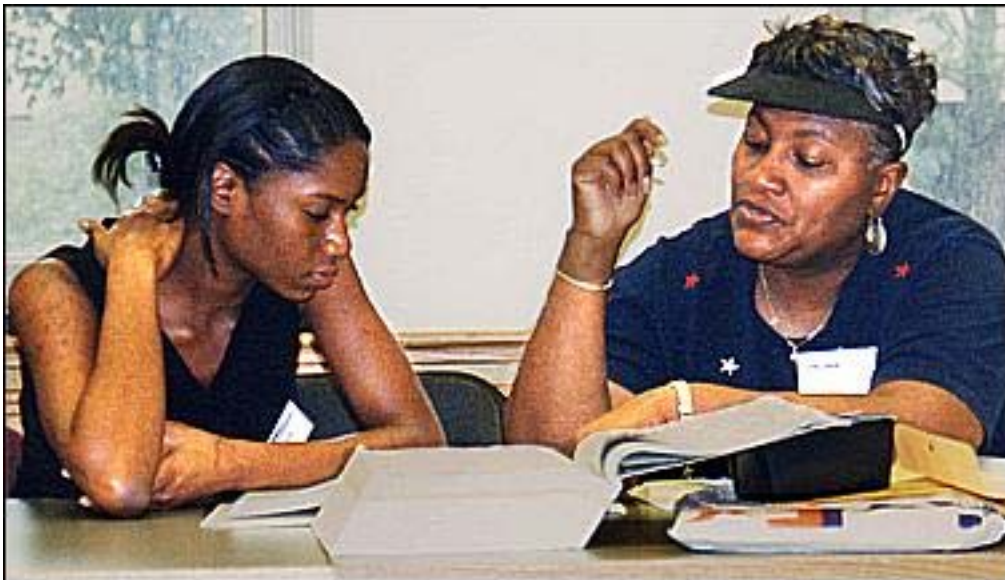
Re-jiggering the Market to Value Talent

The opportunity cost of missing a college education is high. During the past 40 years, the proportion of U.S. jobs requiring some college education has increased from 20 to 50 percent, and college graduates earn \$1 million more over a lifetime than high school graduates, Schramm noted.

And it's not just students who fail to go to college, nor the colleges that miss their contributions, that pay the price — the economy takes a hit too, Schramm said, citing a study "that shows the importance of higher education and how it relates to economic vitality."

Democratizing education has helped give a competitive advantage to the American economy for the past 200 years, Schramm said. Other countries have learned from this, he argued, noting that impressive college enrollment rates in China and Indonesia between 1990 and 1998 (15.6 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively) were linked to rapid growth for their gross domestic products (5.8 percent and 11.1 percent, respectively).

But in America, postsecondary enrollment grew at an annual average rate of just 1.1 percent during the same period, and the gross domestic product grew by only 2.9 percent. These figures illustrate that "the more college-educated employees you have, the more efficient your economy," Schramm said.



Summit counselor

A student meets with a College

After graduating from college, College Summit's students tend to return to live and work in their home communities, investing the intellectual capital they gained through schooling in the communities that need it most. They use connections they form at the College Summit workshop to build a network of mentors and peers that tends to foster success in the business world. The diversity that makes College Summit students attractive to colleges is also an asset to businesses because it helps them discern and meet customers' needs.

"Low-income talent is undervalued," he said. "We figured out to re-jigger that market to realize the value."

Resolving to Fix a Broken Problem

Schramm started down the path that led to the founding of College Summit early in life when court-ordered busing sent him to inner-city schools throughout his childhood, a far different environment from his predominantly white suburban neighborhood in Denver. One of the students who attended high school honors classes with Schramm was a talented basketball player, student council member, and school leader. Schramm received As, while his friend got Bs and Cs, but Schramm never thought of him as anything other than equal.

In his senior year, Schramm applied to an out-of-state school, Yale University, with the help of his college-educated parents, and was accepted. He watched all but his most talented classmates shy away from college and curtail their potential.

Schramm still remembers when his friend — whose parents had not gone to college — told him that a school counselor had advised him to apply only to the local community colleges. Although he was admitted, he said he was going to wait and get a job instead.



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Children from affluent homes can afford to take time off after high school graduation, perhaps taking a year to trek around Nepal or engage in other adventures before entering college, Schramm said. But "it's dangerous for the kid in a low-income community to hang out on the street and maybe flip burgers for a semester. On the street, a year later, their eyes are dulled; there's no way out."

Schramm saw the same drift while working at a teen center after graduating from Yale. He had entered Harvard University's Divinity School and worked as an academic advisor to Harvard freshmen. He often thought of his former high school classmate as he reviewed freshmen admissions files.

These experiences inspired Schramm to enlist the best writing instructor he knew at Harvard, plus a similarly talented urban-youth counselor, to help the teen center's participants realize their abilities — and to push colleges to recognize them too.

After leaving Harvard, Schramm managed a teen education center in the basement of a low-income housing project in Washington, D.C. There he worked with students who, like Tiny, had some of the same skills that characterized his most successful Harvard freshmen — intelligence, resiliency, focus — but like Tiny, they had graduated from high school and derailed.

As Schramm watched talent leave the teen center to hang out on the streets, he realized the system was broken. In 1993 he decided to launch College Summit to help fix it, and — in the words of the College Summit catchphrase to "let talent shine."

Creating a Self-Fueling Venture

With help from New Profit, Inc. and The Monitor Group, College Summit is becoming a fee-for-service business that funds its operations by recapturing the value provided to both high schools and colleges. College Summit's fee-for-service revenues increased by 130 percent this year.

Participating schools or school districts pay fees to College Summit in exchange for boosting their number of college-oriented seniors and giving teachers an opportunity to earn professional-education credit while learning better coaching skills. College Summit trains high school teachers to be advisors who help their students stay on track to college.

High school teachers are given a curriculum that can be built into existing school periods and helps students create a personal plan to get into college. It can also be used for students considering trade school, employment, or the military.

College Summit seeds low-income high schools with motivated talent by training high school seniors who have attended a College Summit workshop and have nearly completed their college applications to be "peer leaders" in their high school. They are prepared (and excited) to help their fellow students get started on the college application process.



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College Summit links high schools with its partner colleges for long-term, ongoing relationships. Colleges tend to compete for the same tiny pool of high-testing, low-income youth in their quest for a diverse student body, so College Summit broadens the pool of diverse talent by providing a cost-effective way for colleges to look at the whole student.

In exchange, a partner college hosts a College Summit workshop on its campus, providing room and board. These partner colleges get a "first crack" at students who attend a workshop on their premises, and access to College Summit's "preview portfolios" of students nationwide.

The preview portfolios include application materials, teacher recommendations, and high school transcripts for pre-screened, low-income students, early in the admissions process. This creates higher retention rates because College Summit students are carefully screened against partner colleges' internal admissions criteria and are therefore better matched and more likely to stay with a college.

Schramm hopes to recapture 100 percent of College Summit's costs through fees-for-services — a social-business venture approach that converts College Summit's social benefits to revenues that will fuel its expansion to a large-scale operation. He envisions a self-financing, expanding program that benefits all the stakeholders: students, high schools, colleges, and the participants' employers and communities.

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