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College for kids with average grades, high drive

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CHICAGO - In his senior year of high school Greg Wilson was just getting by with a 1.9 grade point average. His school was located in a low-income neighborhood of Chicago and his family situation was not a happy one. But Greg had "unwavering ambition" and dreamed of pursuing a college degree.

Next month Greg begins his senior year at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a 3.7 GPA in a double major, in English and political science. He spent part of his summer, however, working at the University of Chicago as an alumni coordinator for College Summit, the group which helped him transform his ambitions into reality.

Four years ago Greg attended a workshop designed by College Summit to shepherd low-income students through the college admissions process. But the program also serves another purpose. It gives colleges - increasingly hungry for diversity in their student bodies - a chance to take a second look at a group whose college applications may not reveal their full potential.

Low-income students with middling grades and test scores are possibly the most underutilized talent in American education, says J.B. Schramm, founder and executive director of College Summit.

It was while he was working with low-income teens in a Washington, D.C., community center in the early 1990s that Mr. Schramm noticed that while colleges aggressively recruited the high-testing low-income kids, the mid-tier students were completely overlooked.

Also, he realized, very few of these teens had college-educated parents who could help them meet deadlines, write essays, and navigate the complexities of financial-aid applications.

What began as Schramm's effort to provide basic mentoring throughout the college application process evolved into a national organization that hosted 20 workshops this summer alone. On college campuses from Los Angeles to Washington, students spent four days completing college essays, meeting one on one with a college counselor for a full hour, and participating in rap sessions designed to break down self-defeating attitudes.

But the 10-year-old group doesn't work just through students. It first connects with the public high schools they attend, telling them, "You have a lot of underutilized talent, and we have the tools to help you," explains Schramm.

College Summit also markets these students to a group of partner colleges and universities. These institutions donate the use of their facilities for summer workshops in exchange for receiving the "preview portfolios" - applications, essays, transcripts, and recommendations - of students deemed worthy of their notice.

The group functions as a recruitment service, helping to identify promising students from diverse backgrounds who might not otherwise attract attention because their test scores and GPAs are only average.

Andrew Sison, dean of admissions at Elmhurst College - a College Summit partner in suburban Chicago - is eager to get College Summit students to his campus.

While these students' high school records may not be outstanding, Sison values the personal stories and backgrounds they bring to the classroom. "All those things help in interpreting data in a different way, looking at art in a different way," explains Sison. "People [learn] about different people, different cultures, just by being in the same classroom."

From sharing a single house with 39 relatives to being a gang member with a gun, these students have stories that don't fit in the spaces provided on college applications.

With the insight of peers and the help of coaches, writing teams help workshop participants draw on their experiences and describe in college application essays the interests, abilities, and potential that their grades don't reflect.

Skyler Bateast, a senior at Campbell Wood High School in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, participated in a recent workshop.

During a session with her "Writing Team" - a writing coach, a high school teacher, and five other students - Skyler brightened as the group responded to her essay, highlighting themes and qualities that stood out to them. "Wow, I never saw myself like that before," she said in quiet awe.

Bringing out such qualities, and then matching them to schools that will appreciate them, is the goal of College Summit. So far, the 5,000 students who have participated in its workshops have achieved a 79 percent college acceptance rate and about 80 percent return to college for their senior year, says College Summit.

The group itself is looking to make some changes, however. Until now, it has relied primarily on donations for funding. But Schramm hopes to see revenue from the program grow to allow less reliance on grants. College Summit has increased its fee-for-service revenue sixfold in the past two years, he says.

Demetris Collins is a College Summit alumna currently studying law and medicine at DePaul University. She also works for the program.

"You know what the perfect word for [College Summit] is?" she asks. "It's absolutely, simply beautiful ... how much we impact students in four days."