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Middle Managers

By Denise Kersten

> A program that aims to get low-income kids into college focuses on C students rather than academic stars.

It's a gorgeous July morning in Baltimore—warm, but not too hot, and the clingy gray haze of humidity that lingers all summer is missing today, leaving blue sky and air you can breathe.

It seems wrong to keep four teenagers inside a tiny, windowless classroom on such a day, but they don't mind. They are focused—more focused, probably, than they have been in a long time.

The visibly pregnant Debra Dickerson holds their attention. She stands before a giant sheet of white paper, red marker in hand. "Okay, so then what happened after you got locked up?" she asks Robert Poteat, a skinny 17-year- old. He prefers the nickname "Peanut," but Dickerson says she just can't call him that. He tells her, shyly, that he was sent to Maya Angelou, a public charter school in Washington, D.C. She takes down his answer in outline form, then asks him more questions about the time he was caught carrying a gun while still in middle school.

This isn't counseling for juvenile delinquents. Robert wants to go to college, and Dickerson's questions are part of a group brainstorming session he'll use to craft his application essays.

Kids from the southeast Washington neighborhood where Robert grew up aren't expected to pursue higher education. "It's bad there," he says in a quiet voice, shrugging. "It's dirty, and there's lots of violence." Neither of Robert's parents went to college, and when Robert was arrested, his father told him he wouldn't go, either. The prediction goaded him, haunted him. "I want to do better for myself and for my family," he says. "It'll prove my father wrong." That's why he accepted his school guidance counselor's invitation to attend this workshop on the campus of Goucher College, one of 19 such events hosted around the country this summer by a national college access organization called College Summit. While there are many such programs for low-income students, College Summit is unusual, and ambitious, because it does not target the top students. Instead, it asks counselors and teachers to invite kids who are in the middle of the pack—like Robert, who has a 2.6 GPA going into his senior year—to attend its free workshops.

Over four days, Dickerson and her group will spend 12 hours together—brainstorming, drafting, reading aloud, and revising until each student produces an essay that gives colleges a compelling reason to admit them. They and the other 37 students at the workshop will also meet one-on-one with college counselors, attend "rap" sessions to talk about their personal and practical challenges, complete an online application accepted by hundreds of colleges, and learn how to advocate for financial aid.

The volunteer writing coaches come from various professions; many are teachers, lawyers, or businesspeople—often with impressive résumés, like former Justice Department director Janet Reno, who led a writing team at the University of Southern California this past summer. Dickerson, an award-winning journalist and the author of *An American Story,* a best-selling memoir about race and class, understands the challenges her students face.

Though clearly gifted, Dickerson struggled with her own postsecondary plans and dropped out of two colleges. Later she joined the Air Force, then graduated from Harvard Law School.

Senior Robert Poteat hopes schools won't pass on him because of his grades.
—Photograph by David Kidd

The students' early drafts reveal much work to be done, so Dickerson focuses on driving home a single rule: Show, don't tell. One student writes about her determination to succeed in middle school before falling through the cracks at a large public high school. Without her mother knowing, she stayed home and watched *Jenny Jones*, though, she recalls, daytime television was even more boring than school. Dickerson pushes her to be specific: "You say, 'I did all the things I needed to do to become captain [of the middle school cheerleading squad.]' But what were those things?" The girl revises her essay to describe the jumps and splits she practiced.

Robert writes about how hard he tried to stay out of trouble even as it swirled around him. He succumbed when an older boy hurt his sister and he sought revenge, but his essay captures his determination to escape a culture of recklessness.

One idea behind College Summit is that focusing on the student with a C average or a 900 on the SAT has a greater impact on the rest of a school than focusing on its academic stars. "If you can get the mid- tier kid converted, the other kids will say, 'If he can do it, I can do it,'" explains organization founder J.B. Schramm.

A wiry man with thin-rimmed glasses, Schramm believes in the program he's launched—really believes in it. When asked what he'd do in a perfect world to fix the college access gap facing low-income students, he doesn't stop to dream up an ideal solution. He patiently repeats his explanation of what College Summit is doing in the real world, as if the question reveals that the reporter has not been listening.

Schramm grew up in Denver, where he attended inner city schools. He hung out with other smart kids and assumed they'd all go off to college. But when the time came, Schramm packed up for Yale University, and his friends didn't advance beyond high school. The difference? His parents had gone to college; theirs had not. His knew how to get him there; theirs didn't.

After Yale, Schramm attended divinity school at Harvard University and served as a freshman adviser. What he saw there shocked him. "They were hungry for low-income talent," he says, but the school didn't have a system to find kids like Schramm's friends who had been left behind in Denver. "There's a market gap there. Colleges are missing talent."

To Schramm, this is a problem that can be solved. Low-income kids often "don't produce data that shows they're college material," he says. "There needs to be a structure in a school so that each student produces a college portfolio. We're talking about changing the college-going culture."

In 2001, 93 percent of the 726 students who participated in College Summit workshops enrolled in two- and four-year colleges immediately after high school. That's twice the national average for low-income students, higher even than affluent students' average of 80 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Founder J.B. Schramm wants to change the college-going culture.
—Photograph by David Kidd

Alumni of College Summit have enrolled at prestigious schools like Brown and Stanford universities and Dartmouth College, but more often they go to public universities, less-famous small schools, or community colleges. "The goal is not getting kids into the most selective schools," says Ed Brockenbrough, who served as a counselor at the Baltimore workshop. Instead, organization officials strive to match students with schools where they will thrive, a focus reflected in the fact that only 20 percent of College Summit alums drop out of the schools they attend. Nearly a quarter attend "partner colleges," schools that sponsor a workshop in exchange for advance portfolios from students who counselors think would fit there.

Underlying the program's concentration on average students is the conviction that these kids are ready for college—if only institutions could see past their numbers. Hence the College Summit motto: "Let Talent Shine." The organization does not attempt to make students more capable for college. It doesn't offer after-school tutoring or funnel kids into internship programs. It simply guides them through the application process, teaching them how to market themselves to colleges and how to find schools that are good matches.

Consider, for instance, 20-year-old Andrea Black. She shouldn't have needed College Summit. She excelled in school and in 7th grade was placed in the honors track at her Chicago public school. A natural leader, she became president of the student council. Her peers saw her as obvious college material, and top schools probably would have, too.

But what people at her school didn't know was that during 9th grade, when Black moved to a new neighborhood and her mother became ill, she started her own private rebellion—against school. "I'd been on the straight and narrow path forever. I got sucked in by the outside world," she says. "I just sat in the back of the class and didn't do anything. I could have passed every single one of those classes, but I didn't."

Black recovered, but not before the damage was done. In her second semester of 10th grade, she says, "I decided to become a stellar student," but the high marks she earned had only pulled her cumulative GPA up to a lackluster 2.8 by the time she had to start applying to schools. She needed a way to make colleges see she was better than her grades.

There was another problem: "It had been pressed in my head since I was young that I was going to school, but nobody really knew how to get me there," Black says. "I had to learn all on my own about financial aid, and FAFSA [the Free Application for Federal Student Aid], and scholarships." That's what brought Black to a College Summit workshop in Chicago in 2000.

Teachers and school counselors attend College Summit workshops, too, for training in how to help students negotiate the college search. A few at the Goucher session worry that the rah-rah atmosphere raises false hopes for some students who may not be ready for college or who have their sights set on highly competitive institutions. College Summit staffers sometimes suggest schools that are long shots or that would be an option only if the student makes a big improvement on the SAT.

But Schramm says teachers are sometimes surprised by the schools that accept their students. He dismisses the notion that some kids can't get into college, noting that there are nearly 2,000 colleges in the U.S. whose only admission requirement is a high school diploma. "That is not to say that every student should go to college," he

adds. "But every kid, at the end of 12 years of public education, needs to take stock of what they want to do—whether it's signing up with the Navy recruiter, or the pizza joint, or Harvard."

This fall, College Summit launched a new phase to pursue that goal. Though only 20 percent of each senior class in participating schools will attend a workshop, every senior will take part in yearlong program to develop postsecondary education plans. The focus is college, but information presented in a self-guided workbook—like how to behave in an interview or how to complete an application—also helps kids following other paths.

The curriculum is simple. In weekly sessions, homeroom teachers will have the "breakfast-table conversations" that most middle class kids have with their parents: Did you sign up for the SAT? Did you finish your essay? When are your applications due? A customized software system called CSNet helps teachers keep tabs on each student's progress and gives the school counselor a bird's eye view of the entire senior class. Students who have attended a College Summit workshop will serve as peer leaders.

College Summit was right to believe in Andrea Black, to see past her middling GPA to her real potential. This past summer, when seniors from Chicago's Morgan Park High School arrived at their workshop, they recognized Black as the girl who had been their student council president when they were freshmen.

She greeted them as the workshop coordinator, part of a summer internship with College Summit that had her serving as the liaison between the program office and partner colleges. Now a junior at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, she's vice president of the student council and her GPA, she notes proudly, is 3.72. Helping students from her alma mater was a highlight of the summer, Black says. "They saw me, and they said, 'There's Andrea. She never let you know she had troubles, but you can work through them just like she did.'"

As for Robert, he grumbles about the workshop's early mornings but acknowledges that he's glad he went. "I knew I needed a college essay, but I don't like writing," he says. Dickerson may have cured him of that.

Denise Kersten is an Annapolis, Maryland-based writer.

On the Web

Learn more about the College Summit and its workshops. Read Frequently Asked Questions for information on how to join the workshops.

In the March 2003 report "Race-Neutral Alternatives in Postsecondary Education: Innovative Approaches to Diversity," the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights profiles the College Summit program.

Read an October 2000 review of Debra Dickerson's book *An American Story*, from Salon.com.

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