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'Better Than Their Numbers'



TARNUE B. KESSELY, 17, SENIOR, ACORN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL, BROOKLYN.

By Scott J. Cech

Photos by Christopher Capozziello

“ My father has told me, ‘If you want to hide a treasure from a black man, hide it in a book.’ This makes me think that through education we can accomplish much in life.”

Handpicking students who lack top test scores and grades but are leaders among their peers, College Summit helps them craft eye-catching college essays and then dispatches them back to their high schools to help foster a ‘college-going culture.’

New Haven, Conn.

Tarnue B. Kesselly was in the middle of a total re-evaluation of his college-worthiness. The 17-year-old New Yorker, now a high school senior, was sitting last month across a table from admissions consultant Edward T. Custard, showing him his transcript but mostly answering questions about his life outside the classroom proper.

To the high schooler, who calls himself a smart but often lazy student, the details of his life seemed ordinary: The Queens resident wakes up early. He spends three hours on the subway so he can attend the public Acorn Community High School in Brooklyn. He reads books for pleasure. He captains the debate club. Nothing special—certainly nothing that would impress anybody at

one of the colleges he half-hoped, half-despaired of attending.

Mr. Custard had a different reaction: “College-admissions people are going to eat that stuff up.”

He should know. Mr. Custard has written or edited four college-admissions guidebooks, and spent about a decade and a half in the admissions field, including several years as the admissions director of the State University of New York College at Purchase. He now works as a senior admissions consultant for the Chester, N.Y.-based company CollegeMasters.

But this afternoon, he was volunteering his time and skills, as he has for the past 10 summers, to College Summit, a non-profit effort centered around the premise that there’s a sizable number of students who are “better than their numbers”:

“My grades aren’t great, but I think I can do better, and I’m learning a lot here that will help me go to college.”

KATHERINE M. OQUENDO, 17, SENIOR, ACORN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL, BROOKLYN.

The 55 students who got a taste of the Ivy League at the workshop come from families that have few or no members with college degrees. Ms. Oquendo hopes to study criminal justice.



more capable of college academics than their test scores and grade point averages suggest.

“Debate is something colleges really recruit for,” Mr. Custard told Mr. Kesselly—an idea new to the student, who would be among the first in his family to attend college. “Colleges love to get students who are thirsty for knowledge like that.”

As the young man revealed the details of his life, his middling grades started to seem less like a definitively underwhelming summation of his college potential, and more like just a part of the high schooler’s personal story—a story in which admissions officers might see more promise than a mere transcript could disclose.

That’s where the application essay comes in—the one part of the written admissions package in which students can tell colleges something about themselves that’s not circumscribed by their academic records.

That’s also where the Washington-based College Summit’s modus operandi parts company with those of a gaggle of other organizations also devoted to increasing the proportion of disadvantaged high school students going to college.

Its intensive four-day summer sessions, such as the one Mr. Kesselly attended here on the campus of Yale University, are focused not on ramping up students’ academic performance—it’s too late, anyway, to substantially better the cumulative GPA of students who, like him, are already three-quarters done with high school.

Instead, hours are spent mining students’ personal histories to find stories or details that might explain why their grades aren’t so hot, but why they’d be great students once they get to college.

“Remember, it’s the admissions office, not the rejection office,” Mr. Custard told Mr. Kesselly. “They’re looking for ways to say yes to people who intrigue them because of the impression they make.”

Unusual Approach

At first blush, College Summit’s approach sounds almost counterintuitive: Raise the college-going rate by focusing not on academics, but on college-application essays and nuts and bolts. Ignore the students of glaringly obvious academic merit in favor

of the jock or class clown who shows occasional glimmers of untapped potential.

It’s not the usual blueprint for an organization trying to boost college-going rates, conceded J.B. Schramm, the founder and chief executive officer of College Summit. But, then again, College Summit isn’t just trying to send individual students to college. It’s trying to foster what Mr. Schramm calls “a college-going culture” in entire schools—and it’s showing signs of success.

“The results we’ve been getting have been striking,” Mr. Schramm said.

Over the past two school years, the only ones so far for which the program has collected cohort data, College Summit figures show that the program has increased the average college-going rate by 15 percent among the 170 high schools it works with, all of which predominantly serve students from low-income households.

According to College Summit calculations of National Center for Education Statistics numbers, the average annual increase in the college-going rate in U.S. high schools overall was 4 percent between 1972 and 2005—the latest year for which data are available from the NCES.

Over the past 15 years, College Summit summer workshops have trained more than 13,000 students to be vectors of college-going cultures at their schools. Even though the program works only with economically disadvantaged schools, and the average GPA of the workshop students has been just 2.9 on a 4.0 scale, the average proportion of workshop participants enrolling in college has been 79 percent since the program’s inception, according to College Summit. That’s significantly above the 52 percent national college-enrollment rate among low-income graduating seniors.

Workshop alumni also tend to stay in college at high rates. College Summit reports that 80 percent of students who have been through the workshops stay in college until at least their sophomore year—a higher percentage than the 76 percent national rate across all demographic groups posted in 2005—the last year for which NCES has data.

“We have been consistently helping schools raise college-going rates,” said Mr. Schramm, who started College Summit in 1993



HECTOR L. DEJESUS, 17, SENIOR, BRONX ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY, BRONX. Mr. DeJesus, who participated in the College Summit workshop at Yale, hopes to go to college in Puerto Rico, where he has family and where he hopes the costs will prove more manageable.

“College was the furthest thing from my mind.”

out of frustration that too many of the college-capable teenagers he tutored at a Washington housing project ended up on the streets. “The way we do that is better deploying midtier, better-than-their-numbers students.”

It works like this: At each of the high schools across 13 states that College Summit partners with, a teacher or counselor who acts as a local College Summit coordinator identifies—either directly or through a fellow teacher’s or counselor’s recommendation—students in the junior class as “peer leaders.”

That group of students, typically about 20 percent of the school’s junior class, is selected on the basis of their perceived leadership potential, and for their middling grades—a 3.0 GPA is usually the upper limit. Almost all the students would be the first or among the first in their families to attend college, and those who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches are preferred.

In College Summit’s use of the term, “leadership potential” has less to do with leading the honor roll than the ability to lead other students. Karin Goldmark, the executive director of College Summit’s New York City office, put it this way: “If you think back to that student when you were in high school who everybody listened to and did what they did, we get that student.”

As a school year draws to a close, the coordinator approaches the school’s select group of underachievers and offers them the chance to take part in the summer workshop that’s part college-application boot camp, part financial-aid tutorial, part self-advocacy factory.

The workshops take place at close-by, College Summit-affiliated university campuses where the students sleep in dorm rooms, eat in dining halls, and put in hours worthy of a pre-midterm cram session. For 12 hours a day, students go through mock interviews for work-study jobs and tuition grants, listen to pep talks, and work together on team-building exercises.

But the bulk of the students’ time is devoted to marathon small-group reviews of one another’s introspective writing exercises—

College Summit says it has increased the average college-going rate by 15 percent among the 170 high schools with which the program works.

the raw material for what will eventually become polished application essays.

“Truthfully, before I came here, I really didn’t want to go to college,” one student in a writing session read aloud from a free-writing exercise page. (Because many students reveal sensitive personal circumstances in the sessions, *Education Week* agreed not to publish the names of writing-session participants.)

He sat in a tight semicircle of six students at desks as writing coach Jasmine Victoria stood at the front of the spartan classroom, occasionally writing key words or phrases on a large sheet of flip-chart paper.

“I’m a good role model when I know how to control myself,” said another student from the Bronx when his turn came to read.

Exercises in Self-Analysis

At first, to an outside observer, most of the material seemed personally interesting, but not particularly relevant to a college essay—just the dross of life that these students have had to put up with. After each student read, they all took turns talking about what seemed especially significant. Ms. Victoria, who most recently ran a New York City restaurant, circled “foster sister,” “ran away,” “stabbed,” and “I don’t like listening to what I don’t want to hear.”

Then she started drawing connecting lines among related words, pointing out overarching themes and encouraging the writers to elaborate on them. It was the beginning of what College Summit calls “gold mining.”

That process, which takes a total of 12 hours over the workshop’s four days, helps students identify and link nuggets of experience and self-made wisdom to help form the backbone of a compelling admissions essay, or as some colleges call it, a personal statement.

“A personal statement is—it’s a snapshot of you. What do you want to say to yourself?” Ms. Victoria asked a girl who was having

trouble writing about an upsetting experience. “What happens in that moment might say a lot about you.”

The essay work doesn’t end when the workshop does. Up until students have to send their essays off to colleges, they work to refine their words in yearlong, for-credit college-planning classes that are mandatory for all seniors at College Summit-affiliated schools.

The classes, which range from once-weekly lessons shoehorned into civics or another course to five-day-a-week, stand-alone courses, help keep students on track with reminders of financial-aid opportunities, pointers on filling in the Common Application accepted by many higher education institutions, and explanations of admissions terms such as “early decision.”

There’s also an online component that updates students by e-mail on the filing deadlines of colleges in which they have expressed interest, and delivers test-prep materials for the ACT and SAT college-entrance exams.

All students who attended the workshops are also expected to live up to the name tags they wore that summer, each of which listed their names and the title “Peer Leader.”

“Students are drivers of whatever the culture is at the school,” said Mr. Schramm, elucidating one of College Summit’s core strategies. “It’s all about getting them to be guerrilla marketers of the college-going culture in their schools.”

Putting a ‘Premium on Bathos’?

Although many organizations aim to increase college-going rates, school leaders and experts on the transition from high school to college say College Summit’s approach and scope appear to be highly unusual.

“My sense is that College Summit has a niche here,” said David Hawkins, the director of public policy for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, an Alexandria, Va.-based group that represents more than 20,000 secondary school counselors and college-admissions officers. “In making the essay their approach, they [let students] know that they are college material.”

Ross Wiener, the vice president for programs and policy at the Education Trust, a Washington-based group that advocates policies to improve the education of poor and minority students, agreed.

“That scale and that kind of systematic approach is fairly unique,” he said of College Summit. The program expects this school year to directly reach about 17,000 seniors through the yearlong courses that follow the summer workshops.

“College Summit has a comprehensive approach that is showing some really amazing results,” Mr. Wiener said.

Frederick M. Hess, a resident scholar and the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank, agreed that College Summit’s college-enrollment numbers are “fantastic,” but he said the program could be accused of gaming the system.

“College Summit is helping some of these kids learn how to package themselves so that whatever the quality of their work and academic accomplishments, they appear more impressive in terms of some kind of tragic narrative, [but that] may not be what we want to encourage as an educational community,” he said.

“This certainly isn’t the fault of College Summit, but there’s a premium on bathos [in admissions offices],” Mr. Hess said. “The ability to paint an impressive narrative of overcome obstacles counts for a good deal—in some cases, it might count for more than accomplishment or quality of work.”

College Summit, whose budget this fiscal year totals \$21 million, isn’t free. Although the program helps school districts match

a required \$5 in philanthropy and corporate donations for every dollar they spend, College Summit can cost schools in the neighborhood of \$10,000 a year—no small change for district officials in tight economic times—and Mr. Hess wondered if the money could be better spent.

“Rather than spend millions to try to level the [admissions] playing field, maybe there are ways we can change those rules of the road so that students are handicapped or disadvantaged less by factors unrelated to their college readiness,” he said.

Leveling the Playing Field

Mr. Wiener of the Education Trust said that College Summit seems less about gaming the admissions system than trying to help students take part in it.

“Many of these students have compelling personal experiences that are legitimate topics for colleges-admissions [essays],” he said. “I think what College Summit is doing is helping to level the playing field.”

“What this program does is provide all the knowledge and skills to those who do not have the means,” John E. Deasy, the superintendent of the Prince George’s County, Md., school district, said of College Summit, with which his 130,000-student system began working in 2005.

Criticism of College Summit’s practical approach to applying to college misses the point, he added.

“You have to be investing in a robust curriculum *and* you have to provide [application help] for students who don’t have that opportunity,” he said, summarizing the respective roles that districts and College Summit play in Prince George’s County. “It’s not an either-or—it’s both.”

Rashid F. Davis, the principal of the 412-student Bronx Engineering and Technology Academy in New York City, said students have told him that the program is “life-changing.”

“Even though we constantly tell them [that they can go to college], it didn’t sink in, it didn’t seem real, until they experienced [College Summit],” said Mr. Davis, whose high school-within-a-school sent students to the program for the first time last summer.

Although the school year has just started for Mr. Kesselly, he said his College Summit workshop has so far had a similar effect on him.

“Before, I was iffy on it,” he said of college. The workshop, he added, “really opened my eyes that you don’t have to be the person with the best background to go to college. I know now I can definitely do this.” ■

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