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Brainstorm drives dream of college

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Imagine if the intellectual muscle that built this nation's great corporations were focused on increasing the rates of college attendance and entrepreneurship among low-income Americans.

It is the scenario that Tulane University's Burkenroad Institute dares dream in this year's seminar, "Making Entrepreneurship Count: A Social Agenda."

The annual symposium on business and society, which generally focuses on ethics, has crafted a program this year that seems tailor-made for a city like ours, one in desperate need of new ideas to eradicate poverty and ignorance.

One of the speakers, Susan Davis, was born in New Orleans and has been a driving force in the micro-lending movement around the world. That movement, which loans small amounts of money to women in poor countries who want to start businesses, has transformed lives in the developing world.

Another speaker, David Bornstein, has chronicled efforts of Davis and others in print and on TV. His book "How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas" looks at these efforts in Brazil, India, South Africa, Hungary, Poland and the United States.

A daunting process

But at a time when many of us have given up hope that the public schools can ever be effective, no speaker at Friday's symposium will be more compelling than J.B. Schramm.

A product of Denver public schools, Schramm was struck by the fact that many of his high school classmates didn't go on to college.

"What defined who went to college wasn't who was capable: It was whose parents had gone to college," he came to realize.

"If you look in the middle class, it takes two kinds of adults to get a student into college," Schramm said. "One is the college counselor, who is the expert.

"The second is the college-experienced parent who nags.

"Basically America is asking first-generation students to do what middle class kids can't do: that is,

to manage their own way through this complex process," he said.

Enrollment and retention

Frustrated that talented high school students were not managing to continue their education, Schramm founded College Summit, an organization with a multipronged approach to getting deserving low-income students into institutions of higher learning.

College Summit helps schools identify the most influential members of their junior classes. It then helps those students apply to college and in so doing equips them to help create a college culture at their schools.

"We've worked with 5,000 students. They've been enrolling in college at a rate of 79 percent," Schramm said. "That is significantly above the national college-enrolled rate for low-income students, which is 46 percent. Their college retention rate has been 80 percent."

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"Making Entrepreneurship Count: A Social Agenda," the 2004 Burkenroad Symposium, takes place Friday from 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. in Tulane's Dixon Hall. The event is free. For information, call 865-5400.

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