

Helping Hand

College Summit tries to improve education opportunities for low-income students

By Karen Breslau
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It's 10:30 on a Friday night, and a group of California high-school seniors are having a "rap session" about getting into college. Asked by a counselor to describe what's going on as they prepare applications, they unload. One student's parents are crack addicts. Another has a father in prison. Many care for younger siblings and parents who can't speak English. While they face obstacles that few middle-class students could imagine, the session's director, Derek Canty, tells them not to get distracted from pursuing college. "You guys are too powerful and intelligent to accept options that other people give you," he says.

Convincing these teenagers they deserve a higher education is the mission of College Summit, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that aims to improve college access for low-income students, nearly all of them minorities. Each summer College Summit hosts workshops nationwide to simulate the "college-going culture" that middle-class kids take for granted, says founder J. B. Schramm. "You need someone to play the role of the parent who asks over the breakfast table, 'Where's your essay? Did you register for the SAT?' "

College Summit isn't designed for minority academic all-stars—they will be snapped up by top schools—but for students like Ramon Franco-Molina. A senior at Oakland, Calif.'s Castlemont High, he has a GPA of 2.78 and didn't even consider college until his junior year. But Franco-Molina is determined to escape the gang culture swallowing his friends. Although his father wants him to work at a nearby auto plant, he has other plans. "Mexicans aren't supposed to go to college," he says. "I'm going to be a bank president."

Over four intensive days, he will work with a writing coach to complete his essay, fill out the common application online and register for financial aid, and with an admissions adviser he'll draw up a list of potential schools. USC is his first choice. College Summit then sends a "preview portfolio" containing each student's essay, transcripts, recommendations and scores to the program's 21 partner colleges around the country. Advisers monitor each student's application online. Eighty percent of College Summit participants eventually graduate from college.

Programs like College Summit are attempting to fill a gap left by weakened affirmative-action efforts. "There's a lot of college-ready talent out there," says Schramm. College Summit helps students discover that themselves.

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