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# Guiding a First Generation to College  NYTimes  April 28, 2016

*First of two articles*.

When Shane Hennings was starting his junior year at Jamaica Gateway to the Sciences High School in Queens, he knew he would go to college even though no one in his family had gone. “My mom and my family always said go and become someone,” he said. “I want to help my mom.”

He assumed that he would go somewhere in the City University of New York system — probably York College, which was in the neighborhood, or a CUNY community college.

“I never thought I’d get accepted to a private school,” he said. “I didn’t understand how to apply” to private school, or even to the State University of New York system of colleges.  And he certain never imagined that he could afford it.

But when I met Hennings earlier this month, he had already been accepted to one SUNY college in Buffalo and another farther north, and was waiting to hear from SUNY’s University at Buffalo and from Canisius, a Jesuit college there with a strong health sciences program (Hennings wants to become an occupational therapist). He’s also waiting to see if the Canisius acceptance comes with a scholarship from New York’s Higher Education Opportunity Program.

Hennings’s assumptions that his only options were community or non-selective colleges are typical for students whose families have no experience of college. They contribute to a huge and pernicious education gap between high-income and low-income kids. Yes, it’s true that a smaller percentage of poor students than rich are ready for good colleges — poverty is associated with worse grades and test scores. But the gap exists even among students who are ready. About 30,000 students from poor families score in the top 10 percent on the SAT or ACT college entrance exams and yet don’t go to sel*ect*ive schools. And nearly a quarter of low-income students who score in the top 25 percent on standardized tests never go to any college.

Many of the causes for the unequal participation in higher education are very difficult to address. But we do know what to do about one big part of the divide: the information disconnect.

Students who are new to America or lack college-educated parents oft*en do*n’t know how important college is. They don’t know their options. They don’t know that the sticker price isn’t necessarily their price. They don’t know how to choose schools and apply for college and financial aid. They also lack the support structure that can keep them on track.

“In New York, they know about Harvard, Yale, N.Y.U. and CUNY,” said Justine Rosenthal, Hennings’s college adviser at Gateway. “Other private schools have funny names and you’ve never heard of them if you weren’t raised in that culture. They don’t know what any of it means.” Some of her students had never heard of the SUNY colleges.

“Most of them hit ninth grade thinking, ‘It’s not for me,’” said Caren Birchwood-Taylor, Gateway’s principal. “The price tag is shocking.” Most are unaware that top colleges give top financial aid packages. For needy students, elite schools can end up cheaper than SUNY, and sometimes cheaper than CUNY. At some elite private schools, the cost to very poor students is near zero.

Many students also don’t know that there’s free money out there. More than a quarter of high-achieving poor students never fill out the Fafsa, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The Common Application for college waives its fees for poor students. But 84 percent of high-achieving students with family incomes under $20,000 don’t apply for a waiver.

The college and financial aid process is confusing and overwhelming for everyone — but some people have help. “High-resource schools have separate professionals doing college advising,” said Nicole Hurd, the founder and chief executive of College Advising Corps. But “in most public schools, someone is doing this alongside everything else they have to do.”

Those someones are usually guidance counselors, who are each responsible, on average, for 471 students; in California, the ratio is now one counselor for 1,000 students. And schools all over are cutting counselors. We talk a lot about teacher/student ratios, but guidance counselor/student ratios matter as well. An additional counselor is associated with a 10 percent increase in enrollment at four-year colleges.

The College Advising Corps is just one of many programs that demonstrate the value of narrowing the information gap. It works with universities in 14 states to hire and train recent college graduates and place them in a high school for two years. The majority of the advisers are first-generation college-goers, almost peers to the students they advise. One is Rosenthal, although she’s not first-generation.

The program’s overall impact on college enrollment is not large — about a three percentage point rise. But its influence over what kinds of schools students choose may be greater. Aileen Moner, program director of the New York University College Advising Corps, said that high schools in New York City with the program have seen a 30 percent to 40 percent increase in students considering, applying to and attending four-year schools.

Those students also stay in college at higher rates than the national average. One reason is that they get more financial aid, and lack of money is the major reason students drop out. "And sending people to the right place is a persistence strategy," said Hurd. "Matching actually works."

Gateway, where virtually no students have parents who went to college in America, was one of four small schools created five years ago as the giant Jamaica High School was being phased out for poor performance.

Rosenthal arrived in 2014, just as Gateway's first senior class started. The expectation of college was not new — families hear about it at open house and orientation events even before their children start ninth grade, said Birchwood-Taylor. All ninth graders take the PSAT exam as practice. "We had the structures in place, the college office," said Birchwood-Taylor. "We had the guidance counselor. But individualized college counseling — the type people pay thousands of dollars for privately — this was our goal. Ms. Rosenthal provides that personalization."

Rosenthal's office, the outer room of a suite she shares with Dennis Tai, the guidance counselor, is always crowded, its seven computers almost constantly in use (although sometimes by waiting students playing video games). Flags from various colleges line the walls — the Ivies, Rutgers, Purdue, Xavier, Michigan. Signs ask: "Want money for college?" and urge students to fill out the Fafsa form and apply to the New York State Tuition Assistance Program.

When I visited, eight students were waiting for her. One was making sure he had sent in his SAT scores. One had a question about a CUNY assessment test. A group of junior boys was looking for colleges where they could play lacrosse. One boy "just doesn't like his fifth-period class," she said.

She sat with the boy who wanted to set up a CUNY assessment. He was nervous about making the phone call. "I'm not going to do it for you," she said gently. She coached him through what he would say. "Want to act it out?" she said.

Hennings is African-American, tall, with glasses. He said Rosenthal has walked him through every step of applying for college. He joined one of the SAT tutoring groups she set up; about 15 kids met twice a week to study. "We concentrate on verbal — here kids do much better on math," said Rosenthal. "If you come at least six times you get a pizza party.

And, Hennings said, he met alone with Rosenthal about 30 times. “She helped me decide on going, decide what I wanted to do, write the essay, fill out forms about scholarships and financial aid,” he said. “She has my mom’s number and stays in contact with me and my mom.” His mother came in several times to fill out financial aid forms with Rosenthal. “She gave us a list of schools that fit our grade point average and SAT scores,” he said.

Hennings went on one of her many trips to visit a college — to Fordham, in the Bronx. He hasn’t yet visited Buffalo. His enthusiasm for the city so far is based on its distance — “I want to leave and explore” — and reports at Christmas from one of his close friends from Gateway’s basketball team, who was off to a great start at the University at Buffalo. (Another important resource poor kids have less of is college-going peers.)

Rosenthal drops into classrooms regularly to talk about college and financial aid. She puts up posters around the school. One displays rappers who went to college. Another is titled “Important People Who Went to CUNY” and lists Jerry Seinfeld, Colin Powell, Andrew Grove and “Mimi — Ms. Rosenthal’s grandmother,” among other notables.

Last year 100 percent of graduating students were accepted to college, 73 percent to a four-year school. And all graduates who qualified financially filled out the Fafsa. Students went to, among other colleges, Yale, M.I.T, Vassar, Rensselaer Polytechnic, Colgate, Skidmore, N.Y.U., Brandeis, Wesleyan and Wheaton, along with SUNY and CUNY schools. It’s too early to know about acceptances this year, but more than 70 percent of students’ applications were to competitive schools, including 116 private schools.

One problem with College Advising Corps and similar programs like the CollegeBound Initiative, which works in 27 New York City schools, is the flip side of their big advantage: the advising is done by humans. Humans are effective, but expensive. Rosenthal makes only $35,100, a salary paid for by N.Y.U., the Advising Corps and Gateway. Even with low salaries, the program is in only 531 high schools around the country — a tiny fraction of the schools that need it.

What can be done without humans? Khan Academy and the Common App both have college advice sections. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, whose mission is to help high-achieving poor students — it was the founding funder of Advising Corps — is working with the College Board and IBM to create an interactive chat program that behaves like a real person. The foundation’s president, Harold O. Levy, said it was modeled on Ask SGT STAR, a virtual guide on the United States Army’s website, and could be ready in “six to 12 months.” And CollegePoint lets high-achieving students get college advice in a digital chat with a real person.

While these ideas are scalable, they also require students to seek them out — and the students who most need them are least likely to know how to do so, or even to believe the information is for them.

College Summit has a completely different idea. It holds intensive summer workshops and trains rising seniors to become peer leaders in their schools, on the principle that the most important influence on a teenager is another teenager.

Many city education departments are starting their own initiatives. In New York City, new funding for college counseling is arriving in 100 schools this year, and in all high schools by fall 2018. Next year, all city high schools will offer the SAT free on a school day, after a pilot program in 40 low-income schools doubled the rate of test-taking. Research indicates this will probably increase the number of students attending selective schools.

Andrea Soonachan, the associate director of college and career planning in the New York City schools, said that about 75 percent of high schools have sent at least one person to take the city's six-day course on college counseling. But while training can increase skills and knowledge, it doesn't help increase the most precious resource: a counselor's time.

Which to choose? All of them. All the models have advantages and disadvantages, but with more investment, together they could form a patchwork quilt covering a lot of students. The number of initiatives is heartening. There have been early visionaries — J.B. Schramm started College Summit 20 years ago, for example — but in large part this problem got no widespread attention until the recent research quantifying the yawning dimensions of the college gap. Now the challenge is to reach a million kids a year.

*Tina Rosenberg won a Pulitzer Prize for her book "The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism." She is a former editorial writer for The Times and the author, most recently, of "Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World" and the World War II spy st*ory e-book "D for Deception." She is a co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network, which supports rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.