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## **A Matchmaker for Elite Colleges**

### **A national program wants to expand options for high-achieving, low-income students**

By SARA HEBEL

Jake Araujo, Monica Colunga, and Zacharias McClendon all excelled in high school, but, like many students from low-income families, they figured they could not afford to attend the nation's top colleges.

Mr. Araujo did not even consider applying to college outside his home state of Oregon, particularly after his father lost his job.

Ms. Colunga, who emigrated from Mexico six years ago, ignored the counselors in her Texas high school who, she says, tried to steer poor students like her to two-year institutions. But with her family's only income coming from her father's \$23,000 construction job, she was not sure how she would be able to afford an elite college.

Mr. McClendon, whose Mississippi home was heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina, saw the \$40,000-and-higher price tags for highly selective private colleges he had hoped to attend and decided that he would have to settle for a cheaper education at an in-state public university.

The nation's elite colleges often appear out of reach to underprivileged students, but there is a flip side to the story. Officials at many of those institutions consider it an equally daunting task to identify and recruit high-achieving, low-income applicants who can diversify their predominantly middle- and upper-income student bodies.

Even for colleges with large endowments, finding the academically talented students of limited means scattered among the nation's high schools is difficult, especially in rural areas and other isolated locations that lack strong college-going traditions. Getting students to apply and enroll can be even harder, particularly for small liberal-arts colleges whose names are not widely known.

Seeing that many of the ingredients to a solution — motivated students, institutions with deep pockets, and colleges with a desire to diversify — were in place around this college-going gap, the leaders of a nonprofit group called Quest Scholars decided to play matchmaker. Three years ago, they created the QuestBridge program, which seeks to develop a national pool of highly qualified college applicants from low-income families and link the applicants with top colleges.

While still in its earliest stages, QuestBridge shows strong promise as a way to raise the college aspirations of bright, low-income students, while also helping elite institutions broaden the socioeconomic diversity of students they serve.

Among the many programs that are trying to improve college access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, QuestBridge is one of the few with a broad, national reach that focuses on helping top students based solely on economic factors, independent of race. Last year, QuestBridge finalists came from 48 states. Just over half were white or Asian, and 39 percent were Hispanic, black, or American Indian.

"Elite colleges are hungry to embrace talented and eager minds," says Michael McCullough, president of Quest Scholars, which is based in Palo Alto, Calif. "And there is a collection of 20 to 30 schools that have done pretty well with their endowments and can now afford to reach out."

### **Building an Applicant Pool**

QuestBridge started three years ago, growing from a summer-camp program that Quest Scholars has operated since 1994 for top students from low-income families. The program's leaders realized that there was a value in — and a demand for — the names of smart students with limited financial means when college admissions officers started asking for Quest Scholars' lists of applicants. Quest Scholars officials decided to capitalize on that demand by creating a program that could help many more students than the 22 that the summer camp had selected each year.

Officials at QuestBridge seek applicants by sending information to students whose names were recommended by teachers or by previous QuestBridge participants, and to students who scored high on the SAT, PSAT, or ACT. There is no specific limit on annual family income, but almost all applicants who are accepted as finalists are from families who earn less than \$60,000 a year.

Applicants must complete an extensive questionnaire that asks for detailed information about their economic backgrounds and how they have handled financial difficulties and other challenges. QuestBridge officials then select as finalists people who have faced significant hardships and meet the minimum admissions requirements for at least one of the colleges that participate in the program.

Finalists can then choose to take part in a match program, which is modeled after the process for selecting medical-school residents. In this method, students rank the participating institutions that they would like to attend and must agree to enroll if one of those colleges admits them. Colleges then agree to provide a four-year aid package that covers tuition, room, and board.

QuestBridge finalists who do not receive an offer through the matching process, or who chose to bypass it, can apply through the regular paths of participating colleges. Admissions officers at the colleges still have the advantage of access to more-detailed personal and financial information about these students than they might otherwise have had because QuestBridge forwards the extensive application that the finalists had

completed for QuestBridge. But under this process, colleges can offer aid packages of any size.

This year 10 institutions, including Bowdoin, Pomona, and Wheaton (Ill.) Colleges, participated in QuestBridge and its match process. Princeton and Stanford Universities also took part but only considered applicants from QuestBridge through regular admissions. Three more institutions — Columbia University and Oberlin and Swarthmore Colleges — have signed up to participate next year, including in the program's match process.

QuestBridge's annual \$1-million operating budget is financed by fees charged to the colleges and by support from donors, such as the Goldman Sachs and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundations. Of this year's 2,200 student applicants, 913 were selected as finalists, and QuestBridge expects as many as 400 to enroll in one of the partner institutions, including the 46 students who were admitted through the match process.

QuestBridge officials are developing methods to track the academic progress of students who have enrolled in colleges through the program. So far program officials say that QuestBridge's partner institutions have reported that the retention rates for students they have enrolled through the program are equal to, or greater than, those for their student bodies as a whole.

### **'Intellectually Hungry'**

Mr. Araujo, Ms. Colunga, and Mr. McClendon are among the beneficiaries of QuestBridge. After learning about the program and the availability of aid, they each expanded their college search to include QuestBridge partners.

All three matched with one of their colleges and received a full, four-year aid package. Mr. Araujo, who applied in QuestBridge's first year, is finishing his sophomore year at Rice University. Ms. Colunga plans to attend Wellesley College this fall.

And Mr. McClendon plans to enroll at Williams College, where he wants to study neuroscience, an undergraduate concentration offered at Williams but not at the University of Mississippi, which he had originally planned to attend.

"When we got a phone call from QuestBridge saying, You got matched to Williams and got a full, four-year scholarship," says Mr. McClendon, "that made me start crying."

Morton O. Schapiro, president of Williams, lauds QuestBridge for reaching students like Mr. McClendon. The program has "an uncanny ability to find really talented, motivated kids," he says.

Last fall 40 students, representing 7.4 percent of the freshman class, enrolled at Williams through QuestBridge, including 14 through the match program. All but one of those students remain enrolled, and Williams officials say they expect that student to return after taking time off. This year Williams has admitted 83 QuestBridge finalists, including 10 through the match program. The college does not yet know how many will enroll.

The students that the college enrolls through QuestBridge, says Mr. Schapiro, are "intellectually hungry" and eager to take advantage of the college's academic programs. But as selective institutions such as Williams try to increase the socioeconomic diversity of their student bodies, he adds, they must also tweak some of their services and policies to help students adjust.

As bright as many of these students are, he says, they often come from poorly performing schools and may need help with study skills or other academic support.

Colleges may have to make other changes, such as keeping dormitories open during breaks when financially strapped students cannot afford to go home. Three years ago, Mr. Schapiro began holding a Thanksgiving feast in his home as Williams increased its enrollment of low-income students, many of whom stay on the campus for the holiday.

QuestBridge officials, too, are planning to promote more activities to help the program's students succeed after they enroll in selective colleges and after they complete their degrees. Among other efforts, program officials are planning to start summer leadership camps for program participants and are developing a QuestBridge alumni support network.

Bill Bradley, the former U.S. senator from New Jersey and a member of the Quest Scholars Board of Directors, says he was drawn to the program in part because of its plans to help students make good use of their opportunity *after* they enrolled at top colleges.

"The goal is also success in life for these students, some of whom have a cultural and social gap" in knowing how to navigate affluent campuses and professional worlds, he says. "Education is the ticket to the better life."

### **What About the B Student?**

Many college officials and higher-education analysts also praise QuestBridge, and other programs with similar goals, for helping to broaden access to the nation's top colleges.

But some college-policy experts say they are worried about another group of students: those from low-and middle-income families who are academically prepared for college but who may not rank in the top of their classes.

High-achieving students often find enough aid to attend college somewhere, they say, but students with mediocre academic records are often offered modest aid packages that could dissuade these students from attending college at all.

Nicole A. Barry, deputy director of the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, which advises Congress, argues that as more institutional aid is based on merit, "the real concern is for the student who might be just out of reach for that merit aid."

Recent studies, such as one done by the Illinois Education Research Council, have shown that the influence of family income on whether a student goes to college weakens as a student's academic preparation for college increases, Ms. Barry adds.

Mr. McCullough agrees that major barriers to college do exist for low-income students of average academic ability and for various other groups. But he has opted for a pragmatic approach, tackling problems for which he sees feasible solutions. Helping high-achieving students gain greater access to top colleges, he says, "is kind of a no-brainer."

Eugene M. Tobin, program officer for the liberal-arts college program at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, says that nonprofit programs like QuestBridge have played important roles in helping colleges expand their socioeconomic diversity. That goal, he argues, is often a tougher challenge for institutions than expanding racial diversity.

"Racial issues are right there in front of you; you can't ignore them," Mr. Tobin says. "But the issue of class is less clear. Those issues don't surface as obviously in daily life."

The Mellon Foundation has helped support QuestBridge, as well as other programs with similar goals. Those include the Posse Foundation, which helps top students from low-income and other disadvantaged backgrounds in five major cities gain access to elite colleges, and the Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America, which works to improve college preparation of students from high schools in rural communities or small towns that serve a high percentage of students from underrepresented minority groups or low-income backgrounds.

Ms. Colunga, the future Wellesley student, says that aiding students like her will help ensure that anyone can work their way to a better life.

"Many low-income students don't even have the expectation to attend college, much less a good college," she says.

At Wellesley, she adds, "the intellectual environment I am going to be exposed to will help cultivate my own intelligence and maybe I'm going to try harder because I will be competing with other students who are motivated."

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Section: Government & Politics

Volume 52, Issue 36, Page A16