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Spotlight on TG's Public Benefit Grant Program: College Forward



Twenty years ago, the process for going to college was reasonably straightforward: take the SAT, fill out an application for school and for aid, mail both, and wait for acceptance, which was generally assured. Today, that's no longer the case. Students now have to write extensive essays, create resumes, gather teacher and counselor recommendations, not to mention compile materials for scholarships and financial aid. Since computers are often the best way to do all these things, students also have to set up e-mail accounts and create log-ins. Add to these tasks, hefty application and test fees, transcript requests, multiple deadlines, and a myriad of communications via e-mail or over the phone. And don't forget the growing competitiveness of the process, with more students battling for a set number of slots at the best schools. Suddenly, the admissions picture becomes stunningly complex and very daunting.

For no student population is this more true than low-income and first-generation students. Research shows that students in this grouping face obstacles on top of the common ones that every student faces. What kinds of obstacles? First-generation and low-income students generally don't get much psychological or financial support because their families don't have knowledge of, or experience with, the college admissions process. They tend to receive negative messages about higher education from their peer groups. And they usually have fewer resources available to them at high schools in low-income neighborhoods.

College Forward, an Austin-based nonprofit organization, offers some unique solutions to these problems. The organization prepares economically-disadvantaged students before they go to college with weekly classes on the admissions process, close mentoring, special workshops devoted to financial aid issues, and even a summer tour of colleges. They follow up once a student is accepted to college with a retention program that helps ensure students stay in school through to graduation.

Growing success

Funded partly by a grant from TG's Public Benefit Grant Program, the College Forward program has experienced some high success rates — 100 percent of participants enroll and get accepted to college, many to four-year institutions; SAT scores improve by a margin of over 100 points; and the majority of College Forward students receive grants and scholarships. The program is growing also — College Forward is now reaching out to four school districts in Central Texas, and, this year, will serve some 250 students.

Why is the program so successful? According to Emily Steinberg, development officer at College Forward, commitment on all sides is one answer. "We have some very motivated students, many of whom come to College Forward after sports practice, band, or other extracurricular activities," said Steinberg. "We offer both early and late classes to accommodate different students' schedules. Our volunteers meet with students at least twice a week. They also hold 'office hours' and additional labs to get extra time in with their students."

College Forward also uses a surprising tool for ensuring students stay interested in their college-prep work — fun. "Students love to compete with each other, so we play learning games using Jeopardy™ or 20 questions," said Steinberg. "We also give prizes when students do well on assignments. On college visits and before ACT diagnostics, we have them participate in a campus-wide Scavenger Hunt to get them acclimated to college campuses. We continually emphasize the importance of having a sense of humor during the entire college admissions process."

The College Forward program has helped over 400 students since its inception. Plans are in the works to expand its offerings to more than 900 more students in the next few academic years.

TG's Public Benefit Award Program

TG established its Public Benefit Award Program to promote college access and student retention in higher education. The program provides grants to institutions that have projects and services created to enhance academic access and success, especially for student populations that have been traditionally under-represented on college campuses.

To receive funds, organizations were required to submit proposals that addressed the issue of access to postsecondary education and that focused on the needs of first-generation college students, students from high schools with low college-going rates, and/or students who are underrepresented in higher education.

To learn more

If you'd like to learn more about TG's Public Benefit Grant Program, you'll find a description of its purpose and process on *TG Online* at www.tgslc.org/public_benefit/index.cfm.